

CONFRONTING THE SYSTEM: HOW LOCAL CROSS-SECTOR EDUCATION  
COLLABORATIONS ADDRESS BARRIERS TO POSTSECONDARY ACCESS & ATTAINMENT

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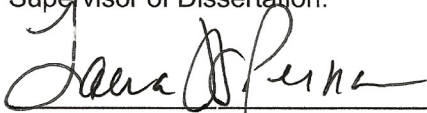
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## **DEDICATION**

To the Philadelphia students and families with whom I had the honor of working throughout my evolution as an educator - you have taught me so much about the deep injustices that fracture our society and also about the liberatory possibilities of an education. I hope that one day our educational systems can more justly serve you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## **ABSTRACT**

# **CONFRONTING THE SYSTEM: HOW LOCAL CROSS-SECTOR EDUCATION COLLABORATIONS ADDRESS BARRIERS TO POSTSECONDARY ACCESS & ATTAINMENT**

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Laura W. Perna

Cross-sector education collaborations, sometimes termed “collective impact” or “cradle-to-career” initiatives, have emerged in recent years across the U.S. as local interventions attempting to align services among educational institutions, local government, businesses, other community-based organizations, and philanthropies to improve educational outcomes. This study utilizes case study methods to focus on how one cross-sector education collaboration, Graduate Tacoma, works to improve postsecondary degree attainment in its local community and ensure equitable outcomes across student groups in the process. Drawing on 26 interviews with organizational stakeholders, internal documents, and a variety of other secondary data sources, the study addresses three facets of cross-sector collaboration implementation: 1) strategies utilized in Graduate Tacoma’s Tacoma College Support Network to address postsecondary readiness, enrollment, and attainment, 2) how those strategies relate to influencing postsecondary-related outcomes and equity in outcomes, and 3) conditions contributing to how those strategies connect to targeted educational outcomes. Findings suggest that strategies are most shaped by organizational missions and leadership of those stakeholders willing to collaborate. Those strategies where the local school district was

heavily involved have had the most influence in shaping targeted educational outcomes. The relationships created among collaboration stakeholders also produce other kinds of public value, improving understanding of how sustained collaboration strategies impact organizational responses addressing postsecondary enrollment, attainment, and educational equity concerns. Study conclusions point to conceptual and methodological considerations for researchers in understanding the forces that need to be considered in assessing how cross-sector education collaborations contribute to systemic educational improvements. By describing the challenges and opportunities in implementing this cross-sector education collaboration, this study also has implications for how policymakers and practitioners can leverage school district and other partnerships in their communities for systemic change.



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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The path to a postsecondary degree, especially for individuals from low or moderate-income families and minoritized communities, is fraught with obstacles, arguably starting from birth into adulthood. Decades of social scientific research have documented inequality in American educational systems across the early childhood and postsecondary spectrum (Duncan & Murnane, 2011), demonstrating structural disparities by income and race in access to quality pre-K (e.g., Valentino, 2018), academic preparation and achievement (Coleman, 1966; Loeb & Bassok, 2008; Reardon & Portilla, 2016; Reardon & Robinson, 2008), in-school and after-school enrichment activities (Carter & Welner, 2013), associate's and bachelor's degree enrollment and completion (Cahalan et al., 2020), and attainment of "good" jobs (Carnevale et al., 2019; Goldin & Katz, 2008). Policymakers connect the future vitality and economic productivity of regions, states, and the nation to the need to increase postsecondary attainment. Others (e.g., Jones & Berger, 2019; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Perna & Finney, 2014) note that our nation will only meet needed levels of educational attainment if structural supports and changes are made in the educational pipeline, particularly for devalued and underserved students.

Entrenched residential segregation among racial groups and concentrated poverty influence and exacerbate disparities in educational outcomes (Galster, 2017; Sampson, 2012; Tate, 2008). Such disparities in turn limit social and economic mobility within and across places (Chetty et al., 2018; Chetty & Hendren, 2018). According to population-level data estimates of the social mobility of children born between 1978 and 1983 in

every U.S. census tract, social and economic disparities are localized in nature (Chetty et al., 2018). For example, on average, a low-income child (defined as parents' household income in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of the national distribution) growing up in my neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania experienced upward mobility, moving to the 58<sup>th</sup> percentile in household income as adults. Just two blocks away, children from low-income families faced downward mobility, where their future household incomes fell to the 11<sup>th</sup> percentile of the income distribution as adults (Chetty et al., 2020). These socioeconomic disparities vary across races and gender even within the same neighborhood, suggesting that local geographic contexts can have different impacts for specific groups (Chetty et al., 2018; Harding et al., 2011).

The need to attend to place-based disparities is further illustrated by variations in postsecondary attainment rates at the local level. While 51.3% of all U.S. adults aged 25 to 64 have some postsecondary education and 43.2% have an associate's degree or higher, the percentage of the population with an associate's degree or higher ranges considerably across the nation's 100 most populous metro areas. Postsecondary attainment (an associate's degree or higher) stands at a low of 22.8% in Bakersfield (CA) to a high of 59.8% in San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara (CA) (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Even within the 10 largest metro areas by population, postsecondary attainment ranged from 40.1% in Houston-Woodlands-Sugar Land (TX) to 58% in Washington-Arlington-Alexandria (MD-VA-WV) (Lumina Foundation, 2020).

Some local communities have advanced efforts to improve overall educational outcomes and equity in postsecondary attainment in their own community. Often driven by philanthropic interests, cross-sector collaborations in education are local interventions

that have the potential to catalyze systemwide changes and address longstanding, place-based educational inequities. Cross-sector education collaborations attempt to align services among educational institutions, local government, businesses, other community-based organizations, and philanthropies to improve educational outcomes from kindergarten readiness to postsecondary attainment in their communities (Henig et al., 2015; Henig et al., 2016). These place-based initiatives, also referred to as “collective impact” or “cradle-to-career initiatives,” offer the potential to address “wicked problems” (Head & Alford, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973), or problems that cannot be solved by one sector or set of policies alone (Bryson et al., 2006; Selsky & Parker, 2005; van Tulder et al., 2016). Unlike previous approaches to comprehensive neighborhood change (e.g., Kubisch et al., 2010), cross-sector education collaborations have a narrower, potentially more achievable, scope for producing community impact (Henig et al., 2015). Through localized engagement, cross-sector education collaborations may also improve “civic capacity,” defined as the ability for communities to mobilize resources within their neighborhoods to achieve shared outcomes (Henig et al., 2015; Stone, 2001).

While some have considered the design of “collective impact” models of partnerships in education (Henig et al., 2016; Kania & Kramer, 2011) and outside of education (ORS & Spark Policy Institute, 2018), our knowledge about what changes across and within organizations involved in these partnerships is limited. With a focus on what cross-sector collaborations do to improve postsecondary readiness, access, and attainment in their communities, this dissertation addresses organizational responses to collaboration by analyzing a case study of one such cross-sector education collaboration: Graduate Tacoma in Tacoma, Washington. The results of this study inform researchers,



policymakers and practitioners about how cross-sector education collaborations create structural change and whether those changes can support communities in improving postsecondary attainment.

### **Situating and defining cross-sector collaborations**

To guide this study, I use Henig and colleagues' (2015) definition of "cross-sector educational collaborations" for its relative precision in identifying collaboration actors in education and their distinct connections to the collective impact movement. Henig and colleagues (2015, 2016) have conducted the most comprehensive analysis of the rise of cross-sector partnerships in education to date. Based on a structured web search of initiatives in national networks as well as initiatives in the 100 largest cities and 100 largest school districts in the nation, Henig and colleagues (2015) defined "cross-sector educational collaborations" as having six core components: 1) being locally organized, 2) large scale, 3) cross-sector, 4) inclusive of a K-12 school district, 5) focused on education outcomes, and 6) formal in organization. Cross-sector was defined as having "meaningful and regularized collaboration across two or more agencies of government" and "meaningful and regularized collaboration of both formal government and key organizations within the civic sector (e.g., business associations, philanthropies, parent groups, community-based organizations, or private social service providers)" (Henig et al., 2015, p.6).

This definition provides specificity for how cross-sector education collaborations work in education compared to prior studies focusing on cross-sector engagement in different disciplines. For example, classic organizational studies like Gray (1985) offered an early understanding of cross-sector engagement focused on the general action of

collaboration among organizations. “Interorganizational collaborations” consisted of three components: “1) the pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources (e.g., information, money, labor), 2) by two or more stakeholders, 3) to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually” (Gray, 1985, p. 912).

Other organizational theorists linked cross-sector partnerships among business and nonprofit entities specifically for social purposes. For instance, Waddock (1991) described collaborations as “voluntary collaborative efforts of actors from organizations in two or more economic sectors in a forum in which they cooperatively attempt to solve a problem or issue of mutual concern that is in some way identified with a public policy agenda item” (p. 481-482). Selsky and Parker (2005) introduced the term “cross-sector social partnerships” (or CSSPs) to describe relationships between businesses, government, and civil society around social causes. CSSPs “jointly address challenges such as economic development, education, health care, poverty alleviation, community capacity building, and environmental sustainability” and are “formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 850; Selsky & Parker, 2010).

In contrast, public administration fields sometimes name “public-private” partnerships or refer to the “third sector” to discuss networks of organizations (e.g., large nonprofits, hospital alliances, universities). These partnerships tend to function outside traditional private sectors (the “market”) *and* public governmental sectors (the “state”) while administering services (Corry, 2010; Ferreira, 2014). Third sector institutions tend to be charities, nongovernmental organizations, social enterprises, networks, or clubs that

subscribe to neither profit-making in the corporate sector nor the bureaucratic or hierarchic structures of the state (Corry, 2010).

Germane to education and this current study are how social policy, nonprofit, and community psychology scholars have used terms such as “comprehensive community initiatives” (Kubisch et al., 2002; Osher et al., 2015; Zaff et al., 2015, 2016), P-20 collaborations (Donnelly, 2017; Núñez & Oliva, 2009), “community collaboratives” (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Jolin et al., 2012), and “collective impact” (Kania & Kramer, 2011) to also describe different forms of cross-sector engagement for community improvement and change. Collective impact has become an especially influential concept in the last decade to describe cross-sector work (see Henig et al., 2016 for a review). Based on Kania and Kramer’s (2011) seminal article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, collective impact initiatives were “long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p.39). Kania and Kramer (2011) identified five core tenets – 1) a common agenda, 2) shared measurement, 3) mutually reinforcing activities, 4) ongoing communication, and 5) an independent backbone organization – that defined features of effective collective impact initiatives based on their observations of several budding cross-sector collaborations across the nation (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

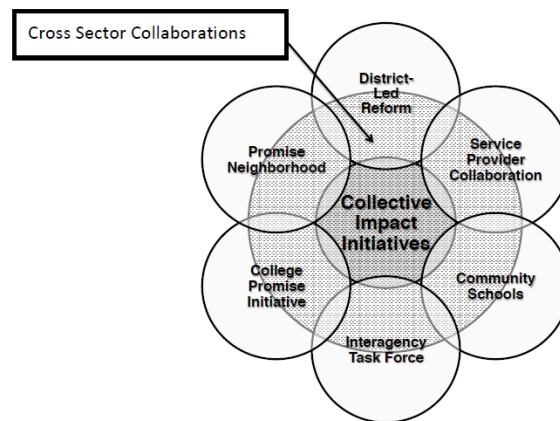
Researchers and evaluators have since applied the five tenets of collective impact to better understand cross-sector movements in health, environment, and human services (ORS Impact & Spark Policy Institute, 2018). In education, Henig and colleagues (2016) traced the influence of the collective impact language across 182 identified cross-sector collaborations, noting that about 60% of collaborations began before the emergence of

the collective impact movement in 2011. However, based on their analysis of the use of collective impact language on websites, Henig and colleagues (2016) also note that even for those initiatives pre-dating the collective impact moniker, about one in four collaborations now use the term to describe their work and about two-thirds of collaborations established after 2011 use collective impact terminology, a trend described as “a remarkable, perhaps unprecedented, diffusion of an idea...” (Henig et al., 2016, p. 22) in a short period of time and without the involvement of government or other funding mandates that might otherwise push the term (Henig et al., 2016).

To situate the rise of collective impact initiatives with the broader ecology of cross-sector collaborations in education, Henig and colleagues (2016) conceptualized collective impact initiatives as one specific kind of cross-sector collaboration among many configurations (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Diagram of Relationships Among Cross-Sector Collaborations in Education*



*Source.* Original image from Henig et al. (2015), p. 7

More specifically, their definition for cross-sector collaborations, signified by the outer ring in Figure 1, encompasses several different educational organization arrangements that include “college promise initiatives,” “promise neighborhoods,” “district-led reform,” “service provider collaboration,” “community schools,” and “interagency task forces.” Collective impact initiatives, signified by the inner ring, could characterize these different organizational arrangements if they are specifically guided by and explicitly use collective impact tenets to organize their work. Contextualizing distinctions among different types of cross-sector education collaborations with attention to the influence of collective impact makes Henig and colleagues’ (2015, 2016) definitions useful in an educational context when compared to other formal cross-sector collaboration definitions not tied to education.

### **Purpose of this study**

Although collective impact’s stamp is built into the study of the cross-sector collaboration processes in education, little is known about the practices and organizational responses required to bring meaningful improvements in education outcomes within cross-sector education collaborations. The collective impact moniker may point to promising design features that undergird place-based, community educational improvements (e.g., shared measurement, common agenda), but collaboration members have little information about the choices, changes, and patterns that are associated with educational progress in these organizational arrangements. Advancing knowledge of these issues may yield insights for navigating cross-sector partnerships for education, what changes to expect from different actors, and how those changes lead to potential changes or improvements that can be sustained in a community.

Cross-sector education collaborations often have goals and activities spanning early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary contexts. This study is designed to focus explicitly on how organizations in cross-sector collaborations work together to support postsecondary access, readiness, and success. This additional focus within a cross-sector collaboration is intended to clarify what organizational members attempt to do when working towards postsecondary-related goals within the collaboration.

With these purposes in mind, this dissertation examines the implementation of postsecondary strategies within one cross-sector collaboration that is part of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, the largest national network of cross-sector education collaborations comprised of 70 partnerships across the United States (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; StriveTogether, 2020a). Established in 2010 as a national organization by Nancy Zimpher and Jeff Edmondson, StriveTogether was structured to support and replicate models of success from the work of the Strive Partnership founded in 2006 that Edmondson had directed in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. The Strive Partnership was a critical example informing the collective impact framework described in Kania and Kramer's (2011) influential article. Cross-sector collaborations in StriveTogether adopt an explicit collective impact strategy for their work, an approach that is not always the case for other cross-sector collaboration networks such as Promise Neighborhoods, the Alignment USA network, or the Coalition for Community Schools (Henig et al., 2016).

This study's purpose is to analyze how the organizations involved in this cross-sector collaboration respond to and adapt to their work, focusing on how stakeholders

organize specifically around postsecondary readiness, access, and completion issues. The study addresses three research questions:

- 1) What strategies do organizations participating in a cross-sector education collaboration employ to improve postsecondary readiness, access, and attainment?
- 2) How do the strategies implemented among collaborating organizations shape efforts to improve the desired postsecondary-related outcomes and equity in those outcomes for the collaboration?
- 3) What forces contribute to the strategies that collaborating organizations use to improve postsecondary-related outcomes and equity in those outcomes?

## **CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Conceptually, how cross-sector educational collaborations address challenges to improving postsecondary attainment requires an understanding of the forces relevant to accessing and attaining a postsecondary degree as well as forces central to how cross-sector collaborations work. To understand forces relevant to accessing and attaining a postsecondary degree, I employ Perna's (2006) conceptual model for explaining postsecondary access and choice. While this framework is situated to describe individual college-going behavior, Perna (2006) utilizes an ecological perspective, especially involving institutional and state policy contexts, to describe the relevant forces in an individual's environment that influence eventual postsecondary enrollment. When applied to understanding postsecondary-related outcomes in cross-sector education collaborations, this framework helps explain how potential kinds of activities and strategies among collaborating organizations can move collaborations further to meeting their postsecondary-related goals and outcomes within their layers of context.

To understand how cross-sector collaborations work more broadly, I primarily draw on Bryson et al.'s (2015) synthesis of cross-sector collaboration research and an updated version of their comprehensive framework identifying components of cross-sector collaborations. I use elements of this framework to discuss mechanisms relevant to how cross-sector collaborations function and structure my literature review of what is known from research about education-focused collaborations.



## **Conceptualizing postsecondary access and choice**

Perna's (2006) conceptual model for postsecondary access and choice integrates four layers of context that influence why individuals decide to enroll in college. At its core, this model asserts that postsecondary enrollment is based on individual decision-making in accordance with human capital theory. Students will make the decision to enroll in college if their conception of the benefits (e.g., higher earnings, employment opportunities) outweighs their consideration of financial and other social or economic costs (e.g., foregone earnings) (Becker, 1994; Paulsen & Smart, 2001). This individual decision is shaped by a student's assessment of their academic preparation and achievement to pursue higher education (Perna, 2006).

In the first layer of context, Perna (2006) draws on core tenets of cultural and social capital to explain students' decisions to go to college. Namely, a student's habitus, or their internalized set of beliefs and dispositions via socialization, will in part drive the ways they conceptualize and even consider postsecondary education as an option. Students exposed to the language, culture, habits, and mannerisms of the dominant class (i.e., cultural capital) may perceive or experience fewer barriers to attending college than students who have cultural knowledges or resources devalued in the dominant system. A student's ability to leverage social capital through access to dominant knowledge and resources via teachers, family members, school counselors, or other networks, can also shape a student's view of college opportunity or the structural constraints inhibiting college-going. These processes along with students' other social identities (e.g., race, gender) all coalesce to influence how students then weigh the costs and benefits of attending college. These processes also help explain the systematic differences in

outcomes for different racial and socioeconomic groups due to how social reproduction and inequality occur vis a vis these forms of capital that are either valued or devalued in society (Carter, 2003; Jack, 2018; McDonough, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

Perna's (2006) model also includes a second layer of context – the role of schools and communities. The availability of resources such as high-quality teachers, well-funded schools, college-preparatory coursework, and trained school counselors will additionally shape a students' academic trajectory and eventual desire or demand for college enrollment. Student relationships to their community both inside and outside of school – including with family members, peers, teachers, and other role models or programs – promote a comprehensive view of community players and community processes that shape student academic and social development through accessing different forms of capital and resources (Dixon-Román & Gordon, 2012). Dominant practices within a child's schooling context, such as approaches to school discipline (e.g., Anyon et al., 2016; Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019), pedagogical techniques (e.g., Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006), or curricula used (e.g., Aughinbaugh, 2012) will also shape the ways that students perceive the value of formal schooling or other informal educational processes.

The higher education context encompasses the first two layers of Perna's (2006) model, recognizing the ways in which postsecondary institutions can also shape student perceptions of college choices and expectations to pursue higher education. For example, institutions have discretion over ways they structure recruitment and student admissions in their local environment or make decisions on where to direct financial or other academic resources to help students pay for college. Dominant practices, such as those in

our current system that dictate whether students need to take standardized tests, fill out financial aid forms, manage recommendation letters, or visit campuses will also influence students' path to a postsecondary degree. Additionally, decisions to promote “free college” in certain communities (Miller-Adams, 2015; Perna & Smith, 2020), or creating bridge programs for students to accumulate college course credit while in high school are examples of other potential institutional policies that, if marketed and saturated in a school or community, can potentially shape student understanding of what “college” means and why it might be an important goal to work toward. Students are indirectly affected by these various institutional policies and practices, but the availability of these resources, programs, or activities can theoretically impact perceptions and eventual college-going decisions.

Finally, in Perna's (2006) fourth layer of context, postsecondary enrollment decisions are shaped by the larger state and federal policy environment impacting higher education funding, student financing, governance, transfer, or admission. Federal court cases on the use of race in admissions or the availability of a statewide need-based grant are examples of larger policy interventions that influence not only institutional mechanisms, but may change how community members advise students, or influence student perceptions of belonging in different campus environments (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Warikoo, 2016). New state or federal financial aid dollars made available to low-income or working students and general societal perceptions of the value of a college degree in a community can all theoretically affect individual decision-making as well (e.g., Castleman & Long, 2016; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Kim, 2012).

When applied to understanding the postsecondary strategies employed in cross-sector education collaborations, I argue that processes and activities implemented among collaborating organizations act as interventions in students' community and school contexts as well as in the local higher education community contexts (Perna, 2006). Policies and practices employed within a cross-sector education collaboration to advance postsecondary attainment goals may also be shaped by related elements in the higher education and policy contexts in the community. For example, the characteristics of the postsecondary institutions in the collaboration's immediate environment and the interaction of state and federal policies shaping how K-12 and postsecondary education is delivered may influence the types of activities involved in cross-sector education collaborations and how they influence potential postsecondary-related outcomes.

I also argue that Perna's (2006) framework helps conceptualize critical junctures and spaces in which policies, practices, and activities that can either improve or limit equitable outcomes, especially racial and socioeconomic forms of equity, occur. Based on conceptualizations of educational equity that either tend to emphasize the relative distribution of resources, opportunities, skills, or other advantages across groups (e.g., Ching, 2017; DesJardins, 2002; Dowd & Shieh, 2013) or that center the role of race and the inherent systemic racism embedded in our social institutions for explaining systematic differences among racial groups (e.g., Ching, 2017; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000), Perna's (2006) framework identifies some of the interconnections between conceptual layers of context by which issues of systemic racial exclusion and resource distributions manifest across time and space. Understanding how cross-sector education collaborations work across these

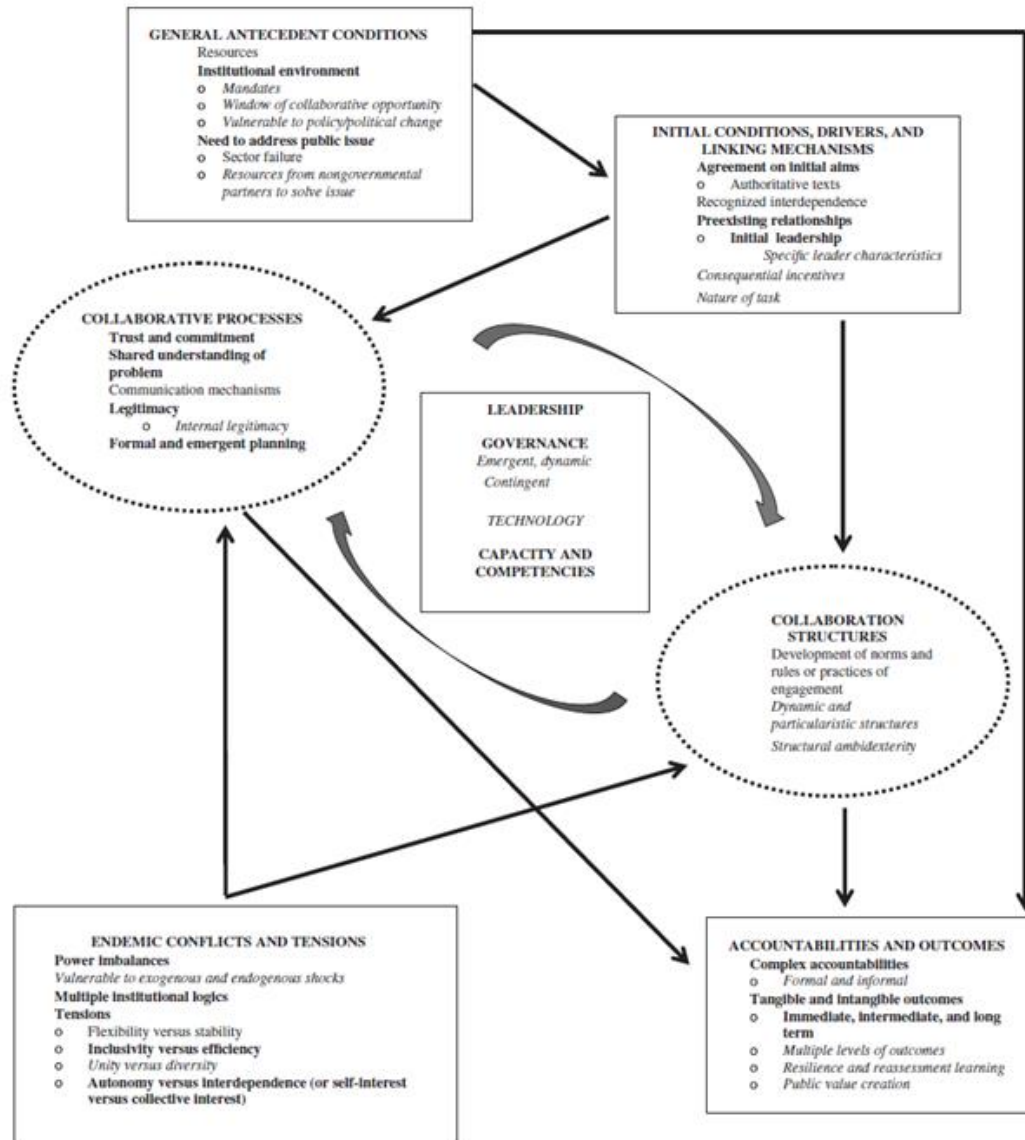
relevant layers of context may advance understanding the steps needed or steps undertaken to address educational inequities embedded in a community.

### **Conceptualizing cross-sector collaborations**

Bryson and colleagues (2006, 2015) developed an influential framework to understand major components of how cross-sector collaborations function, drawing most prominently from studies on cross-sector partnerships in public administration, business, and health/human services fields. Figure 2 reproduces elements of cross-sector education collaborations based on Bryson et al.'s (2015) synthesis of several cross-sector collaboration theoretical frameworks and review of empirical studies from 2007 to 2015 that build on their prior framework for cross-sector collaboration components (Bryson et al. 2006). The authors argue that understandings collaborations must acknowledge how collaborations are “embedded in larger systems; what is involved in collaboration and cross-sector collaboration; its inherently interdisciplinary nature; its systemic, multilevel, multi-actor nature; and the array of significant constituting elements” (Bryson et al., 2015, 650). To capture the multiple forces and complexities inherent in cross-sector collaboration functions, Figure 2 captures the relationships between several constitutive parts of cross-sector collaboration: 1) general antecedent conditions, 2) initial conditions, drivers, and linking mechanisms, 3) collaboration processes, 4) collaboration structures, 5) endemic tensions and obstacles, and 6) accountabilities and outcomes.

**Figure 2**

*Major Theoretical Elements of Cross-Sector Collaboration*



*Notes.* Bryson and colleagues (2015) describe this figure as a “summary of major theoretical frameworks and findings from empirical studies, 2006–15. Bolded elements are from both the theoretical frameworks and recent empirical studies; elements in italics are new elements from empirical studies” (p. 651)

*Source.* Original image from Bryson, J.M., Crosby, B.C. & Stone, M.M. (2015). Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed and Challenging. *Public Administration Review*, 75(5), p. 647-663. Copyright held by American Society for Public Administration.

I draw on this overarching framework to approach answering this study’s research questions by focusing on how “collaboration processes” and “collaboration structures”

work to inform “accountabilities and outcomes.” In the following sub-sections, I summarize related theories that underpin this guiding conceptual framework. I also discuss a separate cross-sector evaluation framework from van Tulder and colleagues (2016) that further delineates how collaboration processes, in particular, influence eventual outcomes and accountabilities that can arise from cross-sector collaboration.

### **General antecedent and initial conditions**

Informing more broadly the “general antecedent conditions” and “initial conditions, drivers, and linking mechanisms” in Bryson et al.’s (2015) model are several theories explaining why collaborations form across different kinds of organizations. Typically, organizational studies employ resource dependence theory (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Hillman et al., 2009; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) to help explain why, in a context where resources are not equally distributed, organizations might rely on external relationships where they can gain most resources in a network or partnership. A resource-dependence lens emphasizes the need for organizations to acquire or compete for resources in their environment. Organizations with more resources have more power than those with fewer resources, creating potential power imbalances in a partnership. Collaborations can also help organizations with less resources gain other benefits by association, efficiency in services, or access to other monetary gains (Guo & Acar, 2005; Henttonen et al., 2016; Herlin, 2015; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Valentinov, 2008).

Nonprofits, and by extension, most schools and universities, stand to benefit from and produce more benefits for partnerships in a resource-constrained environment. While corporations can generate their own profits and governments can tax the public to finance services for the public good (O’Regan & Oster, 2000), nonprofits play a hybrid role,

creating a “third sector” built with public funds, private contributions, and commitment to social welfare (Knutsen, 2012; Zunz, 2012). This unique position for nonprofits makes them more diversified in their resource allocations, but also more dependent on organizations, usually in the corporate sector, that hold greater wealth and ability to enhance nonprofit capacity to achieve their social good missions (AL-Tabbaa et al., 2014; Eddy & Amey, 2014; Guo & Acar, 2005).

In education, resource constraints may encourage schools and universities to form partnerships with philanthropic partners to create community schools, enhance university-community partnerships, or establish university-industry collaborations. As state and local support for public education has waned, corporate and venture philanthropists have become influential sources of funding for K-12 public schools (Hess & Henig, 2015; Lipman, 2015; Quinn et al., 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009) and have had longstanding roles in higher education (Drezner, 2011; Drummer & Marshburn, 2014). These sources of funds help K-12 schools and universities manage their resource-constrained environments, but the market-based reforms often supported by philanthropies have caused concern for those who believe they now have an outsized influence on shaping educational policies outside of public accountability (Lipman, 2015; Scott, 2009). University-assisted schools or community school models, where public schools become the sites for learning as well as for the delivery of public health, social services, and other community engagement activities, can be seen from a resource-dependence perspective as fulfilling various resource constraints of schools to provide other types of supports for students (Moore, 2014). Postsecondary education institutions may also form partnerships with high schools for dual enrollment programs (Farrell &



Seifert, 2007; Jones, 2017), other nonprofits (Kezar et al., 2010; McManus, 2017), other postsecondary institutions (Eckel & Hartley, 2008) or for workforce training or leadership development (Orr, 2001; Siegel, 2010) to produce college-ready and skilled workers and distribute the cost of producing more students among partners to manage their own institutional capacities (Eddy & Amey, 2014; Kezar, 2005; Lane, 2015; Orr, 2001; Siegel, 2010).

Efficiency-related reasons for collaboration are also expressed through transaction cost and network theoretical perspectives. Transaction cost theory suggests that nonprofits should want to reduce the amount of resources expended in the planning, monitoring, evaluation, and strategic development of programs (Guo & Acar, 2005). The changing landscape for nonprofits, and other educational institutions, including the emphasis on professionalizing staff, documenting outcomes, and competing for limited funds in the public and private sector, has required institutions to handle increasing amounts of complexity, which requires more time, expertise, and staffing (Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000; Guo & Acar, 2005; O'Regan & Oster, 2000). Cross-sector “boundary-spanning” collaborations pushing for adoption of private-sector strategies, subcontracting different tasks, or otherwise facilitating information and learning can provide greater organizational efficiency as nonprofits manage these pressures (Suarez & Esparza, 2017). In a network perspective (Guo & Acar, 2005; Powell, 1990), being part of a collaboration also brings greater efficiency in the exchange of knowledge, information, and influence (Head, 2008; Hudson, 2004; Powell, 1990). In turn, these links between public and private sectors provide flexibility, which is thought to spur learning, creativity, and innovation in the network (Hudson, 2004).

### **Collaboration processes, structures, and tensions**

Bryson et al. (2015) also emphasize the close interactions between “collaboration processes” and “collaboration structures,” and various “endemic tensions” that ultimately shape the effectiveness of collaborations in addressing their social goals. More research has focused on process considerations over structure in general, but Bryson et al. (2015) emphasize the role of contextual conditions, leadership, governance, and overall organizational capacities in shaping how collaborations evolve and function.

Understanding collaboration processes often involves highlighting how collaborations build trust, develop communication strategies, and foster legitimacy with its collaborating partners and in the external environment (Bryson et al., 2015).

Theoretical underpinnings for how collaborations build relationships sometimes draw on social exchange theory. Social exchange theory posits that relationships evolve between organizations due to reciprocal exchanges of resources (e.g., money, goods, services, information, status, services) and the interdependency created from that exchange. When organizations are interdependent and equally exchange benefits with each other, commitments are more trusting and loyal (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Organizations can receive these social benefits and make longer-lasting commitments unique to cross-sector collaborations (Guo & Acar, 2005; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Nonprofits may gain more organizational legitimacy in partnerships with higher-resourced organizations due to these resource exchanges. Not only can they meet resource constraints, but deeper involvement may also help nonprofits professionalize their operations and gain business skills (Dart, 2004; Knutsen, 2012). These actions potentially increase access to future donors, status in their local context, and volunteers

dedicated to their work (Herlin, 2015). As nonprofit clients, donors, staff, and the general public shape organizational legitimacy, other kinds of partnerships that align to the public or social justice mission of nonprofits will also be in organizational self-interest (Knutsen, 2012).

Institutional theory also informs collaboration processes between nonprofits, universities, and other sectors (e.g., colleges and businesses) or other institutions (e.g., with school districts or community colleges). Institutional theory posits that organizations conform to norms and standards of their organizational context to meet legal, regulatory, or other requirements deemed appropriate within its context (Bryson et al., 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Guo & Acar, 2005). With these “institutional logics,” or historical practices, values, social norms, rules, or other principles informing an organization’s understanding of their environment (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Knutsen, 2012), institutions may seek collaborations that help them conform to various mandates (e.g., accreditation standards), compete with peer institutions (e.g., in college rankings), compete for other resources that might increase status in the marketplace (e.g., developing patents; Rosinger et al., 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009) or gain legitimacy in a community (e.g., partnering with a college access program; McManus, 2017).

Collaboration structures are generally influenced by various environmental and contextual factors such as the political context, environmental complexity, and resource availability (Bryson et al., 2015). The ability for collaborations to be “structurally ambidextrous” in managing different tensions such as navigating stability and change, hierarchical or more lateral relationships, power sharing, or formal and informal networks of connection also contribute to their overall structure and operation (Bryson et al., 2015).

Often, lines between collaboration structure and process components are blurred as they are also shaped by collaboration leadership, governance structures, and various capacities of organizations to be involved in collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). Furthermore, conflicts and tensions that arise through these different structural and process components influence internal functions of the collaboration and moderate relationships (Emerson et al., 2012). Conflicts often occur as organizations manage “loyalties to home organizations versus the collaboration, differing views about strategies and tactics, as well as from attempts to protect or magnify partner control over the collaboration’s work or outcomes” (Bryson et al., 2015, p. 655). These forces alongside other power imbalances or competing institutional logics characterize the types of tensions that tend to occur in a cross-sector context.

### **Accountabilities and outcomes**

Conceptually, there are multiple kinds of cross-sector collaboration outcomes important to consider – some that can be measured and some that are more intangible. Scholars assert that one primary way to assess the impact of collaborations is through the public value they create (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, 2014). Recognizing that collaborations develop along a continuum (Austin, 2000), creating collaborative value is a dynamic process as relationships evolve. Public value is created when individual and organizational stakeholders not only build on their own self-interests and strengths but also overcome “each sector’s characteristic weakness” (Bryson et al., 2006, p.51).

Researchers have posed that “collaborative value creation” (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, 2014) happens in four ways, creating: 1) associational value, 2) transferred-asset value, 3) interaction value, and 4) synergistic value. Organizational

partners can generate associational value when reputations, credibility, and visibility in their contexts rise together via partnership. Transferred-asset value can be generated from more tangible financial resources like cash donations or the creation of durable intangible assets, such as institutionalizing new knowledge or embedding new skills or approaches in an organization. Interaction value is the most intangible and captures the substance of the relationships created through collaboration and whether those interactions develop opportunities for learning, development of new knowledge, access to networks, technical expertise, or the ability to jointly problem solve and move through conflict. Synergistic value creates the highest form of value if multiple kinds of interactions generally supporting positive organizational change, innovation, more political power, or shared leadership processes among stakeholders (Austin & Seitanidi, 2014).

Other researchers tend to emphasize the multiple layers or nested levels of outcomes that arise from cross-sector collaboration (Popp et al., 2014; Provan & Milward, 2001; van Tulder et al., 2016). Network perspectives emphasize that performance assessment in cross-sector collaborations should focus on three levels of analysis: community, network, and organizations/participants (Provan & Milward, 2001). How well network providers serve key stakeholders – the principal organizations, agents, and clients in the network – can inform more than one level of analysis (Provan & Milward, 2001). Community-level effectiveness includes understanding how client advocacy groups, funders, politicians, and the public understand and value the network and may be measured by changes to the public perception of the problem, building social capital across stakeholders, or changes to the extent of the problem being addressed. Network-level effectiveness refers to primary funders or member organizations and can

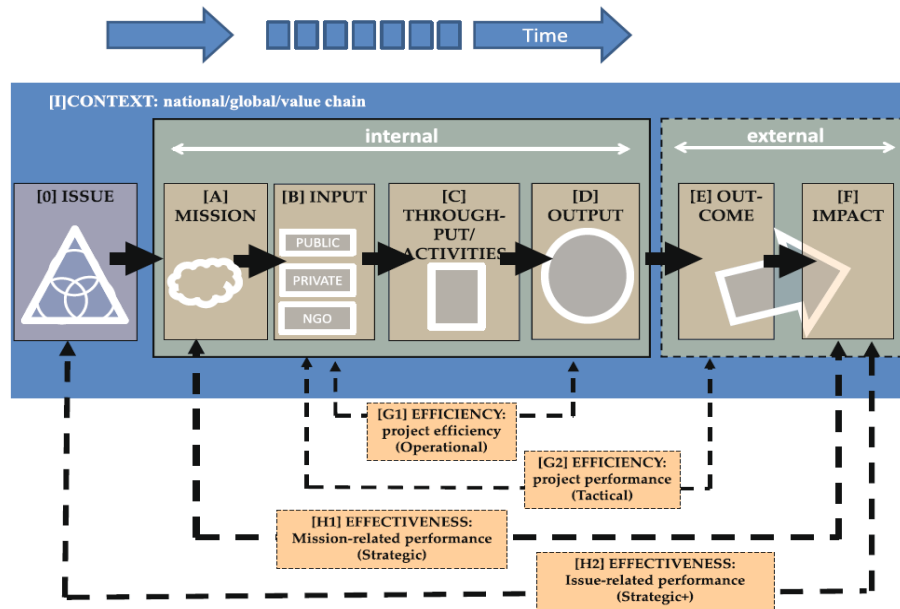
be measured via the sustainability and maintenance of the network, costs, member commitment, and the range of services provided by the network (Provan & Milward, 2001). Organization and participant-level effectiveness includes what board management, staff, and individual clients gain from being part of the network, such as receiving more legitimacy, increased resource acquisition, reductions in conflict across agencies, or gaining more access to other services.

To further synthesize the multilevel nature of cross-sector outcomes and their ability to generate public value, I combine Bryson et al.'s (2015) overarching framework that connects processes and structures to accountabilities and outcomes with van Tulder and colleagues (2016) evaluation framework for cross-sector collaborations to clarify multiple impact loops that occur during collaboration processes across time. To understand different kinds of impacts across the evolution of a cross-sector collaboration, van Tulder et al. (2016) build on others (e.g., Austin & Seitanidi, 2014) to describe the concept of an impact value chain. This chain starts with attention to how the broad social issue that the collaboration wishes to address affects the mission of the collaboration. The central mission of the collaboration then dictates the inputs (e.g., money, staff time) that provide resources and capabilities toward the collaboration. According to van Tulder et al., (2016), at least three kinds of actors provide distinct types of inputs – public actors (e.g., governments), private actors (e.g., businesses), and community actors (e.g., nonprofits, philanthropies, other civil agents). The throughputs/activities (e.g., partnership implementation processes) encompass the activities and strategies of the collaboration where the “actual dynamism, execution and implementation process of partnership” occurs (van Tulder et al., 2016, p. 9). These throughputs conceptually lead to

particular outputs (e.g., results or deliverables from chosen activities) which are measured in the short-term. Outcomes are more intermediate effects resulting from outputs that address more comprehensive changes for “individuals, communities, or society at large after participating in, or being influenced by, the activities of the organizations and the partnership” (van Tulder et al., 2016, p. 10). To complete the impact value chain, such outcomes are linked to overall impact, which encompass all the positive and negative short or long-term effects of partnership (van Tulder et al., 2016). Figure 3 visualizes how these pieces are conceptually connected within the environmental context of collaboration and across time.

**Figure 3**

*The Partnership Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Cross-Sector Partnerships*



*Source.* Original image from p. 10 of Van Tulder, R., Seitanidi, M. M., Crane, A., & Brammer, S. (2016). Enhancing the impact of cross-sector partnerships: Four impact loops for channeling partnership studies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 135(1), 1–17. Open access article through Springer Nature distributed under the terms of Creative Commons License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Van Tulder and colleagues (2016) discuss four different kinds of impact loops that occur across this impact value chain which can be used to understand the variety of

impacts that occur throughout the cross-sector collaboration process. First-order impact loops occur between inputs and activities of particular individuals and their engagement in collaboration activities. At this stage, potential impacts may occur through evidence of internal learning generated from different actors that bring different inputs or activities into the collaboration environment. This internal learning may take the form of increased employee engagement or mindset changes within participating organizations as the collaboration develops its throughputs, or strategies. Second-order impact loops extend to how different inputs among different actors in a collaboration are related to outputs, or specific project performance. Second-order impact loops occur in the space where inputs lead to outputs, “capturing in addition to the operational level effects (first-order impact loop) the tactical level of project performance effects and the interaction between them” (van Tulder et al., 2016, p. 11). That is, outputs generated from second-order impact loops depend substantially on the throughputs, or activities, implemented in the collaboration and if those outputs are “results that a participating organization or project manager can measure or assess directly” (van Tulder et al., 2016, p. 10).

Third-order impact loops account for how the combination of inputs and processes have created more synergistic value around “mission-related performance” (van Tulder et al., 2016, p.11). Considering the collaboration mission, inputs, throughputs, outputs, and outcomes, and interactions across these stages, third-order impact loops demonstrate more concretely whether the entire collaboration met its intended goals. Finally, fourth-order impact loops include the “overall added value captured by the partnership... includ[ing] all the stages from input to impact and assessing the full extent of the partnership’s contribution to the (social) issue” (van



Tulder et al., 2016, p. 12). Fourth-order impacts would address the longer-term outcomes for whether the collaboration ultimately created systemic changes on the social issue the collaboration was established to confront. Consequently, understanding fourth-order impact loops are highly complex given the multiple levels of analysis and interactions occurring across the collaboration over time (van Tulder et al., 2016). In this framework, Van Tulder et al. (2016) suggest that whether the collaboration has created new or different governance structures, filled different types of institutional gaps or services, or in other ways contributed to a greater social good would inform potential fourth-order impact loops in the collaboration environment (van Tulder et al., 2016).

Building on van Tulder et al.'s (2016) framework, there are multiple types of impacts that occur within cross-sector education collaborations at different points of analysis. This framework enriches Bryson et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of the connections between collaboration processes, structures, and outcomes by enumerating how these outcomes are distributed across time in a cross-sector collaboration's evolution.

## **Summary**

In sum, I use three frameworks together to understand collaboration strategy content, how strategies relate to different postsecondary-related outcomes, and what role equity plays in a collaborative context. Perna's (2006) college access and choice model examines the ecological nature of postsecondary enrollment choices and why differential effects might occur across groups. This study specifically explores the role of community players and contexts to engage with how schools and communities ultimately shape postsecondary behaviors of students.

Bryson and colleagues' (2015) framework addresses the complexities and moving parts of cross-sector collaborations. In identifying how different structural and process forces shape accountabilities and outcomes, van Tulder et al.'s (2016) framework creates further distinctions from Bryson and colleagues (2015) work to provide nuance into where and how impact loops occur and what they may look like in a cross-sector collaboration context. Conceptually, this study builds on elements of these frameworks to address what the postsecondary-related throughputs (or strategies) are in the cross-sector education collaboration (RQ1), how those throughputs (or strategies) inform educational outputs/outcomes and equity in outcomes (RQ2), and the forces or conditions that enable these relationships between throughputs and outcomes to occur (RQ3). These questions therefore conceptually focus on how second-order and third-order impact loops occur in a cross-sector education collaboration context.

### **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Past research on cross-sector collaborations is robust and interdisciplinary, most commonly situated in organizational management and public administration fields, and focuses on collaborations between nonprofits and businesses or broader public-private sector governance and partnerships (e.g., Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2014; Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; Clarke & Crane, 2018; Le Ber & Branzei, 2010; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Provan & Milward, 2001; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Selsky & Parker, 2005). This body of knowledge informs understanding of why organizations collaborate, what makes partnerships work, and what potential kinds of outcomes are generated within such collaborations, usually drawing on resource dependency, institutional, and network theories to frame evidence and implications (Gazley, 2017; Gazley & Guo, 2020).

Studies focusing on cross-sector collaborations within education or social welfare sectors remain relatively disconnected from conceptual and theoretical orientations found in organizational and public administration studies (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Kubisch et al., 2002; Núñez & Oliva, 2009; Osher et al., 2015; Zaff et al., 2015, 2016). These studies tend to include reports on elements of collaboration design and implementation (Asera et al., 2017; Bathgate et al., 2011; Houston, 2015; Jolin et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2017; Riehl & Lyon, 2017; Riehl et al., 2019; Swanstrom et al., 2013), leadership in cross-sector education partnerships (Gryzlo, 2014; Malin & Hackmann, 2019) and issues of equity or parent/family engagement within cross-sector collaborations (Banks, 2017; Ishimaru, 2014, 2019). What has broadly emerged across disciplines is that cross-sector collaborations seek to address longstanding social challenges that cannot be easily solved by one sector or set of policies alone (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Bryson et

al., 2006, 2015; Henig et al., 2015; Henig et al., 2016; Riehl & Lyon, 2017; Riehl et al., 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2010).

This literature review describes what is known from research guided by five key elements of Bryson et al.'s (2015) model: 1) general antecedent conditions, 2) initial conditions, drivers, and linking mechanisms, 3) collaboration structures, processes, and tensions, and 4) cross-sector collaboration outcomes and accountabilities. I combine collaboration structures, processes, and tensions together despite their separation in Bryson et al.'s (2015) model because of the interrelated nature of these elements that are not clearly separated in the extant literature in distinct ways.

### **General antecedent conditions for cross-sector collaboration**

Previous reviews of cross-sector collaboration outside of education contexts indicate that several factors influence collaboration formation (Bryson et al., 2015; Seitanidi et al., 2010). The primary antecedent conditions discussed in the literature are the need to address a public issue, the general institutional environmental context and existing relationships, and resources available.

#### **Need to address a public issue**

Cross-sector collaborations usually emerge when there is general acknowledgement that government systems alone cannot remedy a public problem (Bryson et al., 2015). Some type of sector failure is usually present in which resources are needed from nongovernmental institutions to help resolve a problem (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015). The nature of the task at hand also shapes how and when cross-sector collaborations might form to address the issue (Bryson et al., 2015).

Historical overviews pinpoint early forms of cross-sector partnership in education developing during the settlement house movement of the late 1880s led by Jane Addams (Henig et al., 2015; Jolin et al., 2012; Lawson, 2013). The grassroots approach by Addams' Hull House addressed sector failures supporting Chicago's poor and new immigrant populations. Settlement houses demonstrated a shift away from state-sanctioned social welfare approaches that relied on poorhouses, asylums, prisons, and orphanages to deal with the poor (Henig et al., 2015). These efforts provided a transferable model for providing social services to the poor by 'settling' in the neighborhoods and providing comprehensive wraparound services like adult education classes, day care, homeless shelter, and recreation. By 1913, there were 413 settlement houses in operation in 32 states (Dale, 2014 as cited by Henig et al., 2015).

Most contemporary cross-sector education collaborations begin with a sense of urgency within those communities to provide more educational opportunities for students and reduce disparities (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). In a recent report on comparative case studies of eight cross-sector education collaborations nationwide, Riehl and colleagues (2019) describe how underperforming school systems, racial disparities, or other kinds of political, economic, or social unrest often spur pursuing cross-sector collaboration for educational purposes. In their case studies of the Long Beach College Promise and Inland Empire cross-sector partnership, both located in California, Asera et al. (2017) discuss how changing demographics, new economic concerns, and a "moral imperative" to increase educational opportunities in the community all informed progress towards collaboration (p. 8).

### **Institutional environmental context**

Pre-existing institutional environments and relationships also influence conditions for establishing cross-sector collaborations. Whether cross-sector collaborations were formed voluntarily or by policy mandate can affect the level and depth of organizational involvement (Bryson et al., 2015; Eddy & Amey, 2014). Power imbalances and asymmetries may also support or negate cross-sector collaboration efforts, particularly from a collaborative governance standpoint (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Establishing conditions that recognize and engage stakeholders with varying levels of power and resources improve chances of starting cross-sector collaborations (Ansell & Gash, 2007).

Consistent with Kingdon's (2011) framework for policymaking, cross-sector collaboration establishment is also influenced by the political environment, and more specifically, whether collaboration "windows of opportunity" and "collaboration entrepreneurs" exist who can help mobilize solutions to different problem streams that might emerge (Bryson et al., 2015). Relatedly, cross-sector collaboration establishment also benefits from boundary-spanning leadership and identifying those people in the community who can champion the need for cross-sector collaboration across stakeholders (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Bryson et al., 2015).

As one example of "collaboration entrepreneurship" among cross-sector education collaborations, the settlement house movement waned after World War I influenced other stakeholders and institutions. John Dewey's vision of schools as vehicles for practicing democratic engagement, a precursor to the community school movement (Dryfoos, 2002), drew from lessons and observations from Addams' settlement house movement (Seigfried, 1999). Dewey advocated for school buildings to become essential

sites for providing various community services during the Depression, drawing attention from early philanthropists, like Charles Mott and the Mott Foundation, to scale the idea and lay the groundwork for the emergence of further educational collaborations (Henig et al., 2015).

Another counterintuitive “window of opportunity” for establishing cross-sector education collaborations emerged in the 1980s in the era following the War on Poverty and Great Society legislation. While these bodies of legislation provided unprecedented federal support and central planning for educational and social welfare programs (e.g., Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Higher Education Act of 1965, HUD’s Model Cities program) in the 1960s, cuts in federal government spending through the 1970s and 1980s created an environment where nonprofits now competed for funding to address program service gaps (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). State and local governments stepped in, developing more comprehensive service delivery systems, but philanthropies also expanded their presence during this time, contributing to an environment where organizations now needed to compete for funds (Hess & Henig, 2015; Zunz, 2012). While results from initiatives in this era were generally inconsequential due to weak coordination (Henig et al., 2015; Jolin et al., 2012), fragmentation, and competition between organizational actors (Christens & Inzeo, 2015), the changing federal and philanthropic landscape shaped the institutional environment in which more recent cross-sector collaborations for social causes would continue to emerge.

### **Available resources**

Financial incentives also can be catalysts to building cross-sector collaborations, though sources of those incentives can vary greatly. In the 1990s and early 2000s,

“comprehensive community initiatives” (CCIs) (e.g., Empowerment Zones, Enterprise Communities, Annie E. Casey Foundation’s New Futures project, Ford Foundation’s Neighborhood and Family Initiative) proliferated across the country in attempts to create neighborhood transformational change through organizational collaboration, citizen participation, and coordinated services across human services, community revitalization, and economic development sectors (Henig et al., 2015; Kubisch et al., 2002, 2010). The financial and technical resources from large foundations and philanthropies continued to drive momentum for cross-sector collaboration as CCIs attempted to build widespread neighborhood revitalization initiatives with grassroots community participation. Not only did CCIs attract new private and public investment in their communities, but they also changed how philanthropic and public initiatives thought about community revitalization efforts, emphasizing resident participation, partnerships, and attending to community context (Kubisch et al., 2002). Despite many CCIs falling short of community transformation, the availability of public and private financial resources may shape whether cross-sector partnerships and solutions emerge.

More recent iterations of cross-sector education collaborations continue to benefit from philanthropic interest and locally raised dollars. For example, Lumina Foundation’s Community Partnership for Attainment gave 75 cities over \$250,000 each to build the foundations for cross-sector partnerships for raising postsecondary attainment in their communities. Each city also received technical support and networking opportunities through convenings and meetings with the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP, 2013; IHEP, n.d.; Lumina Foundation, 2015). Maeroff’s (2014) case study of Say Yes to Education notes how a \$15 million incentive in start-up capital is promised to cities



agreeing to partner with the organization. That incentive brings community entities in the school district and city government together to begin discussing initial outcomes for the partnership (Maeroff, 2014; Riehl et al., 2019). For the Long Beach Promise and San Bernardino-Riverside (“Inland Empire”) two-county partnership, California’s statewide Governor’s Incentive Award served as an initial catalyst (Asera et al., 2017). Participants saw the external funding as boons for their collaboration, with funds used to provide more opportunities for professional development of their staff and organizational learning opportunities from other experts (Asera et al., 2017). The Road Map Project working with seven South King County area school districts and the Puget Sound Educational Service District received Race to the Top funds and developed a collective impact-inspired initiative (Petrokubi et al., 2017; Robles, 2016). The anonymous private donation to establish the Kalamazoo Promise acted as a unifying incentive to eventually add wraparound supports into the public-school system that enhanced the benefits of the place-based scholarship (Miller-Adams, 2015). Infusions of cash, guidance, and technical support seem to create conditions for cross-sector education collaboration.

### **Initial conditions, drivers, and linking mechanisms**

While general conditions might exist within a community to make cross-sector collaboration more likely, there are no guarantees those cross-sector collaborations will transpire or be effective. Prior research suggests that defining the problem and shared goals (especially through formal means such as via memoranda of understanding, contracts, by-laws) among potential stakeholders, initial leadership, pre-existing relationships and networks, and the nature of the task all influence the formation of a cross-sector collaborative partnership (Bryson et al., 2015). Research on cross-sector

education collaborations does not necessarily distinguish between these different dimensions but tends to concentrate on formal and informal ways that cross-sector collaborations build support for their work initially and the role of leadership for starting and sustaining cross-sector collaborations.

### **Formal and informal mechanisms for building support**

Initial involvement of stakeholders in cross-sector collaborations can vary tremendously. In their comparative case study of eight education collaborations, Riehl and colleagues (2019) found that, while most partnerships start with a core group of key stakeholders, some partnerships decide to “cast a wide net” to accommodate many potential partners. Others chose to build a “smaller core base of civic leaders” before extending activities to a wider subset of organizations (Riehl et al., 2019, p. 38). In a case of Say Yes Buffalo, an “Operating Committee” comprised of core leadership n selectively chose new partners to invite to the table (Riehl et al., 2019). For Milwaukee Succeeds, an influential group of civic leaders developed the initial elements of the initiative but made a public call across the city and via word of mouth to attract new stakeholders to the table (Riehl et al., 2019).

In building community support for cross-sector collaboration, formal mechanisms may help build partner agreement especially when stakeholders are less familiar with each other or their partnership networks. For example, in a multi-site case study of implementing school-community development partnerships focused on engaging youth under the Assets Coming Together initiative in New York State, Lawson and colleagues (2007) observed that, where youth services were fragmented in a rural area, formal trainings in youth asset development helped connect leaders and key partners together.

Bringing initial community and civic leaders together to analyze community data is another formal mechanism by which cross-sector partnerships begin the process of goal alignment. In a case study of the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, a model for collective impact, a fundamental precursor to partnership was bringing education, youth development, health care, business, philanthropy, government, and academia together to create a detailed roadmap and vision of progress for children while facilitating the sense-making process (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Jolin et al., 2012).

Other research on mobilizing communities to build civic capacity (Henig et al., 2015; Stone, 2001; Swanstrom et al., 2013) suggests that casting a wide net can help with subsequent public buy-in. For example, Swanstrom and colleagues (2013) describe the challenges for the 24:1 program, a neighborhood revitalization and education collaboration across 24 municipalities in St. Louis' inner-ring suburbs for improving the Normandy School District (NSD). With an economically distressed population and fragmented or non-existent social services in the area, the NSD and its civic leaders partnered to improve the school district. Rather than pointing fingers at external funding or one institution, stakeholders identified problems across school and communities and across policy silos. 24:1 created a unified, broad definition of the problem so that initial participants bought into the public mobilization (Swanstrom et al., 2013). With public branding initiatives and a common agenda around the specialization areas of community members (e.g., social welfare, education), 24:1 created a collective community vision despite a history of disconnected services (Swanstrom et al., 2013).

Informal mechanisms can also unify partners especially when pre-existing relationships are apparent or when organizations share similar institutional logics. In a

case study of the LEAD program, a university-government-industry business education initiative for underrepresented students, partners leveraged their existing partnerships to address educational and workforce needs and meet competing demands (e.g., desiring a more inclusive workforce, increased diversity in customer bases, legacies of underrepresentation of business role models in minority communities) (Siegel, 2008, 2010). The program then worked to develop more formalized approaches for calculating the return on investment of the partnership and ensure partner universities had competitive business programs (Siegel, 2008, 2010). Lawson and colleagues (2007) observed that, where there was already an infrastructure for partnership, reaching consensus on goals for a collaborative youth partnership was easier from the outset due to the trust previously built from other work together. In a comparative case study of collaborative cross-institutional curricular alliances, Eckel and Hartley (2008) found that, rather than formal procedures, personal rapport with other members often determined the healthy functioning of the alliance.

### **Leadership**

Strong leadership is not only a prerequisite for creating the general conditions for partnership, but also a necessary and critical ingredient for successfully establishing and sustaining cross-sector education collaborations (Asera et al., 2017; Bryson et al., 2015; Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Henttonen et al., 2016; Houston, 2015; Jolin et al., 2012; Townsley, 2014).

Most case studies of leadership in cross-sector education collaborations suggest that leaders need to be able to work across different organizations and institutions to find common ground and demonstrate systems-level thinking (Gryzlo, 2014; Malin &

Hackmann, 2019; Townsley, 2014), whether in urban and rural contexts. For example, Miller and colleagues' (2017) study of a rural cross-sector partnership for education reform in a struggling rural town described the pivotal role of a former superintendent with extensive community ties. The leader's history of organizing informal collaborations to address pressing social issues facilitated an organic, networked response to this new evolution of partnership.

Visionary and transformational leaders who embrace complexity, adaptability, and maintain a vision for the collective can often be a driving force for an initiative (Lane, 2015). However, having a partnership only revolve around one transformative leader is not sufficient for impactful cross-sector partnerships. Leaders who play a more facilitative role, as suggested by Crosby and Bryson's (2010) integrative leadership framework for cross-sector collaboration, look to create collaborative leadership with several individuals. Developed from case studies on a government-business-nonprofit GIS initiative in Twin Cities, Crosby and Bryson's framework (2010) suggests that leaders need not only a clear grasp of the local context of the partnership, but also various champions who organize change efforts and other sponsors who may serve as advisors, provide funding, or fruitful connections to enhance visibility and legitimacy for the partnership.

Malin and Hackmann's case study (2019) examining leadership structures and processes in a cross-sector collaboration of high school career academies across an urban school district finds further support for facets of Crosby and Bryson's (2010) integrative leadership framework. More specifically, the authors conclude that focusing only on leadership strategies particular within a high school or career academy will miss

important nuances in how school leaders traverse different dimensions of cross-sector collaboration from their initial conditions, conflicts, and outcomes. The authors describe how district leaders especially had to navigate communicating the appropriate message and coalition-building to bring groups together that initially believed career academies were too focused on vocational learning or were irrelevant to their student populations (Malin & Hackmann, 2019).

Leadership at all levels of an organization is also key to sustaining cross-sector work (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Jolin et al., 2012). In the case of the Long Beach Promise and San Bernardino-Riverside partnership, middle-level leaders played a crucial role in facilitating the “cultural acceptance of new ideas” (Asera et al., 2017; p. 20) into the institutional culture and in the daily practices of staff and faculty working directly with students. Middle-level leaders not only gain expertise in thinking both institutionally and systemically, but they also provide the operational capacity to fully realize and sustain new visions of partnership (Asera et al., 2017).

The ability for core organizers to be flexible to the different shifts in roles and partner alignments is also important for sustaining collaborations (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Jolin et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2013; Townsley, 2014). Leaders can ensure that the structure of the collaboration is flexible and adaptive to strategic opportunities, particularly planning for leader successions (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). The ability for leaders to engage in deliberate planning strategies and embrace emergent strategies can strengthen and sustain cross-sector collaborations (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Malin & Hackmann, 2019), a skill also stressed in the collective impact model of collaboration (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2013).

## **Cross-sector collaboration structures, processes, and tensions in implementation**

How cross-sector collaborations work, from establishing roles, distributing resources, building trust and legitimacy, coordinating work, and evaluating results, are all important components to understanding cross-sector collaborations (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Kubisch et al., 2002). Collaboration processes (e.g., building trust, legitimacy, communication) are informed by and intimately connected to collaboration structures (e.g., development of norms, rules, or practices of engagement) (Bryson et al., 2015). Such collaboration processes and structures, in turn, are shaped by evolving roles of leadership, governance, technology, and interpersonal capacity or competencies within the collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). “Endemic tensions and obstacles” will also iteratively influence general collaboration processes and structures (Bryson et al., 2015). For instance, cross-sector collaborations often navigate tensions and conflict related to competing institutional logics, general organizational autonomy vs. interdependence, stability vs. flexibility, inclusivity vs. efficiency, or internal vs. external legitimacy (Bryson et al., 2015). Cross-sector education collaborations also can attempt to create political and civic capacity in their communities, which may further be influenced by power imbalances or also enable deeper or more equitable social change in communities (Henig et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2007).

### **Determining structure and process**

How cross-sector collaborations determine process and structure begins during initial stages of leadership formation and partnership (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Like other cross-sector collaborations, education collaborations tend to organize themselves

with what Riehl and colleagues (2019) refer to as a “strategic collaborative core.”

Collective impact strategists refer to this entity as a “backbone” organization that centrally coordinates cross-sector collaboration functions (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

In their study, Riehl and colleagues (2019) document three distinct ways that education collaborations organized their core leadership: an elite-centered approach, a grassroots-led approach, and a hybrid approach. The elite-centered approach is most common and typically includes civic leaders in education and social welfare sectors developing goals and strategies for implementation. Riehl and colleagues observe that while there is wider community consultation, there is “relatively less emphasis on deep community involvement” from this approach (Riehl et al., 2019, p.57). One of their cases, a federal Promise Neighborhood program, developed a bottom-up, grassroots approach where members living and working in their community comprised leadership and staffing of the initiative. In a hybrid approach focused on community schools in Oakland, involvement in central leadership and planning consisted of grassroots supporters, “grasstops” leaders of community agencies, and elite civic leaders. To govern cross-sector education collaborations, usually some type of leadership council or operating board of civic elites externally interact on behalf of the collaboration. Collaborations then are also governed by a board of directors or executive committee focused more on internal operations and strategy for the collaboration and task forces or planning groups made up of more direct service stakeholders implementing activities in the collaboration. Some collaborations also had other special structures that varied (e.g., a data council or committee, other coaches) (Riehl et al., 2019).



Collaboration structures inform how partnerships become institutionalized and promote “interaction value accumulation” – a concept laid out by Austin and Seitanidi (2012, 2014) where information among and between partners turns into collaboration knowledge and capabilities as partners increasingly interact with one another. Backbone entities pay staff members to organize activities that promote collaborative processes (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Riehl et al., 2019; Siegel, 2008, 2010). As one example, Jolin and colleagues (2012), in a national report of practices in high-performing community change collaboratives (defined as making 10% gains in a key community indicator or more), recount how Philadelphia’s Project U-Turn cross-sector collaboration set up operations to be successful for addressing the city’s high school dropout crisis. The Philadelphia Youth Network acted as the backbone organization for Project U-Turn that then hired a vice president focused on daily operations of the network. This staff member facilitated a steering committee, defined the work to be completed at each network meeting, and cultivated relationships with members across the network. Jolin and colleagues (2012) also observed that no specific structure or number of staff was consistent, but effective management tended to include having staff separated into teams dedicated day-to-day facilitation activities, data collection, internal and external communication, and administrative duties.

Research suggests that roles are iteratively redefined among partners. Role definition is generally considered integrative over time and role calibration can signal momentum toward more successful collaborations (Austin, 2000; Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). Success or failure of partnership can also be moderated by how partners frame risk (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). In a study of nonprofit and for-profit partners in a cross-

sector Canadian healthcare initiative, leaders only concentrated on partnerships more at risk rather than those functioning well (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). The authors concluded that not only are friendly relationships important, but that social value elements of partnership must be emphasized to reduce complacency or disillusionment in weaker partnerships (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

As initial structures and roles are developed among partners in cross-sector collaborations, another immediate need is strategic plans of action. Across their eight sites, Riehl and colleagues (2019) document how action plans tend to change quite often and that the timing to create such plans varies in cross-sector education collaborations. Collaborations that were part of a national organization or network may have had to create initial plans more quickly, but all collaborations underwent processes for consensus building and changing elements of plans over time (Riehl et al., 2019). The authors concluded that “capacity and flexibility are crucial, since these are largely voluntary assemblages of partners that cannot rely on traditional authority structures for determining broad goals, strategies, and structures” (Riehl et al., p. 42).

Different approaches to structuring collaborations may lead to different results and consequences for communities. In an examination of the Ford Foundation’s Neighborhood and Family Initiative, Chaskin (2001) noted different approaches to implementation in two of the four initiatives, Milwaukee and Hartford. In Milwaukee, stakeholders focused on creating and supporting multiple new organizations to form and address workforce development issues and providing other community services. Hartford concentrated on establishing one central community-based organization to organize residents into block club networks and to conduct revitalization and other neighborhood

planning efforts (Chaskin, 2001). These different approaches may have contributed to different results. Milwaukee gained more resources to attract businesses and provide job training while Hartford witnessed more resident advocacy on quality-of-life issues.

### **Forces shaping structure and process**

Various forces can influence how cross-sector collaborations reinforce structures and processes in collaboration while eventually influencing collaboration outcomes (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; van Tulder et al., 2016). Bryson and colleagues (2015) identify well-documented issues of leadership and governance as forces both determined by and determining structure and process, and their many intersections. The authors also note that different technologies, both those that help organize work procedures, and those that are embedded as an “ensemble or ‘web’ of equipment, techniques, applications, and people that define a social context” (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001 as quoted by Bryson et al., 2015, p. 655) help facilitate collaboration processes and also help reveal systems-level complexities that can help spur changes in public perceptions or internal organizational understanding (Bryson et al., 2015). Different collaborative capacities and competencies (Bryson et al., 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001) among individual and organizational stakeholders also shape cross-sector collaboration structures and processes. Individual traits like concern for the common good or interpersonal understanding (Crosby & Bryson, 2010) or organizational features like strong leadership, formalized processes and procedures, well-developed internal communications, the ability to attract resources, and adopt a continuous learning approach all shape overall capacities for cross-sector collaborations to run effectively (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001).

Research specific to cross-sector education collaborations does not directly test these frameworks but does shed light on how forces like trust-building, coordinating work among partners, securing resources, and utilizing data, shape various dimensions of cross-sector collaboration processes.

### *Developing trust*

Trust is an important recursive process often emphasized in a collaboration, but more difficult to operationalize and study (Getha-Taylor, 2012; Venn & Berg, 2014). Getha-Taylor (2012) found through interviews and content analyses of narratives from 56 selected public-private partnerships that drivers of trust varied between contract-based partnerships and other kinds of partnerships (e.g., joint programming, confederations, and new organization consolidations). While trust among partners relied more heavily on benevolence (e.g., up-front investments of time, money, other resources) or integrity for most partnerships, how partners handled risk was the most defining aspect of how trust was negotiated in contract-based partnerships.

While few studies on cross-sector education collaborations describe how trust is created, research suggests the need for consistency and integrity in building and sustaining trust in collaboration over time. Continuous communication, a tenet of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) is one mechanism for developing trust across stakeholders. Observations of cross-sector initiatives, including the Strive Partnership, suggest that trust can be built through monthly or biweekly meetings with executive level leadership (vs. lower-level delegates), structured agendas, trained facilitators, and management tools to facilitate workflow and communications in between scheduled meetings (Kania & Kramer, 2011). In an investigation of the racialized dimensions of

cross-cultural trust in a cross-sector context, Banks (2017) found that while stakeholders of color tended to trust other stakeholders of colors more often, cross-cultural trust was also nurtured in the collaboration through demonstrations of integrity and action. The more partners showed follow through on plans and action items, the more trusting relationships developed over time (Banks, 2017).

### *Securing and distributing resources*

Gaining and sharing financial, human, and social resources is fundamental to the viability of cross-sector collaborations and increases legitimacy for the collaboration (Riehl et al., 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Cross-sector collaborations originate in part to obtain access to needed resources, but resources exchanged must also have organizational fit to co-create value. In Austin and Seitanidi's (2014) "collaborative value creation" (CVC) framework, public value is theoretically created on a spectrum when resources and interests between organizations are progressively integrated and linked together. Resources contributed among partners can be generic, like money or the positive reputation of a nonprofit, or organization-specific, like capabilities, skills, and knowledge developed from the organization's strengths (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). The more resources co-create value and are unified (i.e., resource directionality), fit together (i.e., resource complementarity), are distinctive to the partnership rather than tied to one organization (i.e., resource nature), and are broadly and deeply linked to the interests of participating organizations, then the highest form of value creation is possible (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, 2014).

Resource alignment and integration in education collaborations also facilitate advantages for those collaborations that have found ways to knit together multiple types

of resources rather than rely on one organization (Jolin et al., 2012). Some education collaborations have lobbied city, county, and school district administrators to create line-item budget allocations to stabilize their work while also relying on philanthropic or corporate foundation dollars to continue to build organizational capacity (Riehl et al., 2019). For example, the fiscal model used by Say Yes to Education, an organization providing tuition scholarships and cross-sector wraparound supports to students in four regions (Syracuse, Buffalo, Guilford County, and Cleveland), is rooted in an initial \$15 million investment and six-year plan with a partner city to bring stakeholders together and develop locally sustainable funding (Maeroff, 2014). Say Yes then works to analyze available budget and service data as well as organize local stakeholders. At their first site in Syracuse, Say Yes established a scholarship board consisting of local philanthropic and business leaders to help raise money for a state college and university fund. To bring postsecondary institutions on board who wanted to recruit diverse and well-prepared students, Say Yes also knew they needed to provide wraparound supports in the local school district and devised fiscal analyses to better understand how resources for youth and family services were being spent in Syracuse. By identifying service gaps for the city, county, and school district in this way, Say Yes was able to get an average of \$5.25 from other sources for every dollar invested in Syracuse and later Buffalo (Maeroff, 2014).

Some cross-sector education collaborations have lobbied for state-level funding. Riehl and colleagues (2019) note that several cross-sector education initiatives in Wisconsin have “banded together to lobby for state support for literacy projects” (p.71). For one Promise Neighborhood, partners leveraged political alliances to be included in

state legislative budgets and Say Yes Buffalo was able to receive state funding for postsecondary supports as well as sizeable foundation dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Riehl et al., 2019).

### *Utilizing data*

The emphasis on data-driven decision-making is a hallmark of the collective impact model for collaboration and encouraged in contemporary cross-sector collaborations (Lin et al., 2015). Establishing shared measures to monitor performance and identify areas of improvement requires a culture shift for most organizations (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Shared measurement helps establish a common language among constituents, solidifies a common agenda, and facilitates collaborative problem-solving, all which work to build trust among collaborators from different organizations.

The process of building shared measurement mechanisms is not well-researched (Raderstrong & Nazaire, 2017) and is complicated by sectoral differences in staff capacity and knowledge, different data management systems, and data quality. Raderstrong and Nazaire (2017), affiliates of Living Cities, a collaborative of 18 international foundations and financial institutions working to scale collective impact work in the U.S., draw from interviews with practitioners of performance management and collective impact initiatives to report five steps in effective data usage: agreeing on the data, finding the data, presenting data, discussing data, and then changing behavior and sharing responsibility.

Agreeing on data requires strong facilitators and core research and analysis skills. Organizations might set up data committees for this work and hire data managers to

oversee these functions (Raderstrong & Nazaire, 2017). Finding data was the most common challenge for various stakeholders (Raderstrong & Nazaire, 2017).

Organizations might be able to identify a wish list of data indicators only to find that such data may not exist or are difficult and expensive to access. Data sharing agreements are one formalized way cross-sector collaborations can share and obtain the localized data they need – a strategy used by Say Yes to Education before entering a city (Maeroff, 2014) and encouraged by the StriveTogether Network (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). Conducting surveys and building in-house software platforms are other strategies used to provide infrastructure to data collection (Raderstrong & Nazaire, 2017).

Others have noted the difficulty of implementing cross-sector collaborative work (Bathgate et al., 2011; Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2016). In a case study of how network leaders manage collaboration activities across nine cross-sector collaborations enacting collective impact strategies, leaders focusing on framing the agenda for the collaborations often felt limited in the types of data and information available to make crucial decisions, especially in early implementation, and in deciding what strategies were needed to engage with minoritized communities served by the collaboration (Myers Twitchell, 2017).

Organizations in the Corridors of College Success Initiative, a collective impact collaboration of community colleges funded by the Ford Foundation to increase postsecondary completion, expressed capacity constraints in data infrastructure that limited their ability to use data effectively (Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2015, 2016).

Partnerships like the Strive Partnership have broken down these data conversations into



manageable bits (Edmonson & Zimpher, 2014). But it is rare to have communities with all systems of accountability in place (Bathgate et al., 2011).

There are potential benefits to investing in and utilizing data within cross-sector education initiatives, including facilitating trust-building across stakeholders. From case studies of Milwaukee Succeeds (WI), Say Yes Buffalo (NY), and All Hands Raised (Portland and Multnomah County, OR), Riehl and Lyon (2017) noted that, while the collaborations tracked multiple measures of academic performance (e.g., academic achievement, high school graduation, school attendance, and to a lesser extent, school discipline and access to technology), the initiatives do not seek to be the “chief architects” of school improvement. Instead, these cross-sector education collaborations tread lightly on local politics around school distribution of resources, tracking, and school attendance zones (Riehl & Lyon, 2017). The use of data helped collaborations focus their efforts on providing wraparound services. Attention to data also helped to counter long-standing narratives of underperformance in schools while positioning these collaborations as more trusted entities working between school and neighborhood services (Riehl & Lyon, 2017; Riehl et al., 2019).

#### *Other local and state initiatives*

Few studies have investigated how local, state, and federal policy contexts shape cross-sector education works. While cross-sector initiatives have been utilized at regional or state-levels, evidence is limited on whether they promote changes within sectors or on the broader education policy apparatus. Research on regional and state-level P-20 councils focus on the limitations of state P-20 councils for affecting policy changes, pointing out that unaligned policy systems can create barriers for college access (Mokher,

2010; Núñez & Oliva, 2009; Perna & Armijo, 2014; Rippner, 2014; Venezia et al., 2005). Donnelly (2017) analyzed regional P-20 councils to better understand their interactions with state P-20 councils as well as other policy advocacy activities. A regional approach may develop insight into needs of communities not addressed by state or national policy. A focus on orienting work toward policy advocacy and change is usually established over time and established councils felt well-positioned to affect policy. Donnelly (2017) breaks down policy engagement activities among regional P-16 councils, explaining their role as bridging networks between council activities and members' own networks. The councils also share regional data, set up policy subcommittees, and become clearinghouses for information.

The presence of regional P-20 councils and related activities may provide a structure to influence policymaking. Donnelly (2017) shows that seven of the ten states with the most P-20 legislation also had state and regional P-20 councils, as well as robust non-education sector participation. However, links between regional council activities and actual passed state legislation remained inconclusive (Donnelly, 2017).

### **Tensions and obstacles**

Threats to cross-sector collaborations are abound due to the complexity of the work across multiple partners, different institutional logics, power imbalances among stakeholders, and other sources of conflict (Bryson et al., 2015; Le Ber & Branzei, 2010; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Sources of conflict can occur in navigating commitment and loyalty to one's organization versus the collaboration, disagreements over strategies and tactics, and attaining credit and status within the collaboration (Bryson et al, 2015; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009).

### *Navigating time and resource constraints*

Cross-sector education collaborations face similar tensions to other kinds of cross-sector collaborations that occur at the individual-level, organization-level, and overall collaboration-level. For example, how individual stakeholders prioritize work in the cross-sector collaboration suggest a constant negotiation of priorities. In a case study of how capacity was built between school district and community-based organizations in the Road Map Project in South King County (WA), Robles (2016) documented the time burden of collaboration duties, which had to be completed on top of other demands or primary job functions. While participants believed the partnership was closing intended achievement gaps, collaborative work still felt “extra” rather than integral to work roles.

Implementing changes across organizational stakeholders requires substantial time and staff resources, as well as the ability to understand and act on feedback loops between partners. In studying one local school district’s experience as a partner in the seven-district cross-sector collaboration also within the Road Map Project, Petrokubi and colleagues (2017) found tensions in how local district players balanced the needs of their school district with the bigger picture of regional partnership. Stakeholders at the building-level for the school district viewed some of the work required in the collaboration as more “an ‘obligation,’ (Petrokubi et al., 2017, p. 23). District stakeholders also described that the absence of ongoing conversations about data generated from the Road Map Project to help inform more specific district activities (vs. comparisons with other districts) and a perception that the collaboration lacked understanding for the bureaucratic processes limiting how the district makes improvements also reduced district engagement at times in the partnership (Petrokubi et

al., 2017). Robles (2016) also found that elements of the Road Map Project that required behavioral changes (e.g., collecting data differently) rather than a technical response (e.g., changing kindergarten registration day) were harder to implement. The difficulty in changing work coordination reflected the need to provide constant feedback loops to partners, primarily by using data to show progress on ongoing metrics (Robles, 2016).

*Navigating race, class, and power dynamics*

While frameworks for cross-sector collaboration stemming from public management and business perspectives do not necessarily name issues of race, class, or other political dynamics as forces shaping collaborations (Bryson et al., 2015; Clarke & Crane, 2018; van Tulder et al., 2016), cross-sector education collaborations have to be deeply aware and sensitive to issues of race, socioeconomic status, and power, especially when promoting educational equity as a goal (Banks, 2017; Chaskin, 2001; Eddy & Amey, 2014; Henig et al., 2016; Ishimaru, 2014; Moore, 2014; Shipps, 2003; Stone, 2001). Actively navigating these dynamics is also needed if cross-sector education collaborations are to realize their potential as tools to enhance civic, community, and collaborative capacity (Banks, 2017; Chaskin, 2001; Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Henig et al., 2015; Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016; Selsky, 1991). Civic capacity, also like coalition-building, refers to “the ability of a community to build and maintain a broad social and political coalition across all sectors in pursuit of a common goal” (Swanstrom et al., 2013, p. 25). These processes also work in concert with building collaborative capacity among across four different levels: 1) within individual members of a coalition, 2) between coalition members, 3) within the organizational structure, and 4) within sponsored programs (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Page, 2016; Swanstrom et al., 2013).

Developing these capacities within communities and organizations can address conflicts that arise in partnership, feelings of distrust, and differing institutional logics that ultimately weaken alliances (Equal Measure, 2017b; Henig et al., 2015; Kezar et al., 2010; Kubisch et al., 2010; Stone, 2001; Swanstrom et al., 2013; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). As collective impact approaches have more recently been critiqued for not addressing issues of power and privilege often at the center of conflict in cross-sector work (Christens & Inzeo, 2016; LeChasseur, 2016; Wolff, 2016), there is renewed interest in better understanding approaches to ensure cross-sector collaborations promote community interests and how collaborations act on their principles of achieving educational equity.

Some research indicates that reducing tensions and building trust in cross-sector education collaborations, especially to promote equity, relies on authentic relationships and action. As mentioned, in Banks' (2017) case study of how a cross-sector education collaboration formed cross-cultural trust among practitioners, people of color trusted other people of color more than members who identified as White, a dynamic also observed by White coalition members. Trust was also built based on three other behaviors: when people "showed up" to the partnership work, when they spoke "truth to power," and if they "walked their talk" (Banks, 2017). The participants highlighted that reliability and consistency and risk-taking through difficult conversations were all ways of building cross-cultural trust (Banks, 2017). When power imbalances were named and addressed directly, as well as backed up by concrete actions, network partners expressed more trust in the partnership.

How cross-sector collaborations perceive issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their communities may also shape how collaborations respond to race, class, and power dynamics. Some clues for how constituents understand issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a cross-sector context are provided in Equal Measure's (2017b) preliminary report evaluating Lumina Foundation's Community Partnership for Attainment Initiative involving 75 cities involved in cross-sector education collaboration. Drawing from interview data from stakeholders from all cities and visits to 14 communities, findings show that diversity is primarily conceived as *who* is in the partnership demographically (e.g., race, religion, gender), by sector (e.g., public organizations, faith-based institutions), and power or stature to influence in their role (e.g., CEO vs. parents) (Equal Measure, 2017b). Partners developed awareness over time for how values of equity were reflected (or not) in their structural operations, usually consisting of an executive leadership committee, steering group, and action groups that liaised within the community. More diverse perspectives were often sought in the action or work group level of organization, but less among the executive or steering committees (Equal Measure, 2017b).

Past research on comprehensive community change initiatives (CCIs) demonstrates that civic organizations are often the lynchpin in bridging communities and governmental boundaries to overcome power imbalances within communities (Emerson et al., 2012). Drawing from the Aspen Institute's reports led by Kubisch and colleagues (2002, 2010) of CCIs in the 1990s and 2000s, the authors emphasize the need to be comprehensive, adaptable to diverse needs of community members, and deliberate and intentional. At the organizational level, hiring practices among staff, organizational

culture, and accountability need to also have a community orientation to reinforce the collaboration objectives. When institutions are fragmented or highly isolated, building civic capacity becomes more difficult. The case for the 24:1 initiative in the Normandy School District demonstrated that stronger civic organizations could gain community trust and resolve through extensive work (Page, 2016; Swanstrom et al., 2013). Through instituting planning committees, over 52 public meetings, and bringing together diverse constituent groups, the initiative improved connections among different municipalities and re-engaged the business community in their efforts (Swanstrom et al., 2013).

While cross-sector collaborations engage with their communities at different levels of depth and through different formats, cross-sector education collaborations make different choices about how to embed themselves in the education politics of a community. For example, Riehl and colleagues (2019) describe how Milwaukee Succeeds “made a decision early on not to align exclusively with the traditional public school district, but to focus its attention on ‘every child, in every school, cradle to career’” (Riehl et al., 2019, p.86). In the context of contentious relationships between traditional public schools, a growing charter school sector, and religious and private schools, Milwaukee Succeeds positioned its programming to be inclusive of all sectors, leveraging the expertise of the public school district and allowing the school district and other entities to affiliate closely or distantly as needed to maintain involvement (Riehl et al., 2019). Say Yes to Education navigated conflict in their partnerships in Syracuse and Buffalo when the partnership became directly involved in the selection of a school district superintendent (Maeroff, 2014). Findings pointed to the importance of Say Yes leadership working with all educational stakeholders to ensure that school board and the

teachers union were treated as full and equal partners. Say Yes now requires teachers' unions to sign on to an agreement before entering a city (Maeroff, 2014).

Even with an awareness of potential power imbalances and racialized or political conflict, parents and community members often have the least power in cross-sector educational initiatives. From an ethnography of structures that bolstered parent civic capacity in a school district and community-based organization alliance, Ishimaru (2014) emphasized that nondominant parent groups, such as parents of English Language learners or from minoritized backgrounds, need a stake in creating an agenda that aligns with goals of systemic change. Cultivating relationships among multiple stakeholders and engaging in political processes that impact broader community issues may create the spaces for parents to engage but also requires a shift in how educational leaders handle community engagement. As concluded from a comparative case study of three collective impact initiatives, cultural brokers who can translate policies to the community and be responsive to community needs facilitate equitable cross-sector collaboration and community engagement (Ishimaru et al., 2016).

### **Cross-sector collaboration outcomes**

Research examining outcomes in cross-sector education collaborations does not necessarily draw directly on ideas and frameworks in public administration and organizational fields that delineate public value outcomes or nested outcomes that should be considered in the study of cross-sector collaborations (Austin & Seitanidi, 2014; Bryson et al., 2015). Evidence from comprehensive community change initiatives (CCIs) (e.g., Zaff et al., 2016) and on education collaborations (e.g., Riehl et al., 2019), however,



can point to multiple kinds of public value being generated among education collaborations.

### **Public value creation**

Prior reviews of cross-sector collaborations, not all education-oriented (Greenberg et al., 2014, 2017; Kubisch et al., 2010, 2011; ORS Impact & Spark Policy Institute, 2018) provide indications that interaction and transferred-asset types of public value were primarily created through changes in how organizations interacted together to create new services and programming. For example, Kubisch and colleagues (2010) reviewed accomplishments of 43 community change initiatives (CCIs) existing between 1990 and 2010 for the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. Their review concluded that CCIs were often able to provide services and activities to enhance human, physical, and economic development and improve the well-being of residents who actively participated in programs in their neighborhood (Kubisch et al., 2002, 2010, 2011). Evaluations of the New Communities Program (NCP) in 14 Chicago neighborhoods funded between 2002 to 2012 by the MacArthur Foundation also demonstrated that local organizations could partner across interest lines (Greenberg et al., 2014). Implemented by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC Chicago), the NCP facilitated almost 850 community improvement projects worth over \$900 million in funding for activities such as improving commercial corridors, providing job training, and scaling local organizational ability to bring in private donations and other additional financing for community projects (a form of transferred-asset value).

Local organizations with more trusting relationships generated more partnerships and captured more funds than smaller community development corporations (CDCs) that

struggled more to change organizational models. For neighborhoods with less trusting relationships and histories of antagonism, even initial gains were made in planning and early implementation although partnerships were harder to sustain over time (Greenberg et al., 2014). Evaluators noted that the strengthened coordination and help of LISC as the backbone agency for the project may have helped sustain projects despite major budgetary crises experienced during the Great Recession (Greenberg et al., 2014). Among CCIs, communities also demonstrated increased synergistic value by advancing greater capacity for leadership and bridging public, private, and nonprofit sectors together (Chaskin et al., 2000; Greenberg et al., 2014; Kubisch et al., 2011).

Cross-sector education collaborations seem like CCIs in this regard as research indicates similar abilities for the collaborations to create new and augmented programming, regardless of collaboration type. Through a case study of a full-service community school, Galindo and colleagues (2017) drew on social capital frameworks to detail how ongoing and more intensive interactions between principals, teachers, and staff provided more services in the school. Case study evaluations of five Promise Neighborhoods, funded by the U.S. Department of Education within the first two years of implementation between 2010 to 2012 show that partnerships created more community capacity to provide services (Hulsey et al., 2015). Each site had identified a lead agency to structure the work, counted on a multitude of service providers to execute goals, and built shared data systems and accountability structures, systems of staff co-location, and referrals between organizations to further strengthen alignment within the neighborhood (Hulsey et al., 2015). Drawing on interviews from stakeholders, including school principals, family engagement staff, families, and other partners and school district

administrative data, a separate interim evaluation of the Mission Promise Neighborhood in San Francisco (CA) also discussed increased alignment between school and community providers, especially around academic, social, and emotional learning (Sipes & de Velasco, 2017).

From an in-depth case study of a Las Vegas Promise Neighborhood, Horsford and Sampson (2014) assert that particularly in demographically changing communities with less history of community organizing, prioritizing improvement of community capacities through leadership structures, policy coordination, and fostering organizational collaboration was a prerequisite to influencing other power and accountability structures often advocated for in community development strategies. That the Las Vegas Promise Neighborhood was ultimately unsuccessful in competing with communities more well-aligned together for further federal funding underscored the need to focus on building the types of processes that create particular types of public value to ultimately serve deeper revitalization efforts.

### **Collaboration “outputs” and “outcomes”**

Collaboration structures and processes are sometimes, but not always, linked to outcomes of interest in cross-sector education collaborations, including improved educational outcomes (e.g., high school graduation rate, postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary completion) or other community and economic development measures (e.g., housing price changes). Prior research on CCIs across domains (e.g., social service, public health) points to varied long-term impacts. Both qualitative and quantitative evidence on CCIs, for example, show shorter-term gains in lowering unemployment rates, but do not indicate widespread population-level changes in child or family well-

being or long-term reductions in poverty (Kubisch et al., 2011; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2017). One systematic review of population-level changes in 25 studies of five CCIs meeting experimental and quasi-experimental design criteria focused on public health and prevention science (Flanagan et al., 2018). Each CCI's body of evidence indicated positive short-term impacts (e.g., reduced drug or alcohol intake, parent-child quality of interactions) and long-term impacts (e.g., lifetime substance use, reduction in antisocial behaviors), indicating that CCIs of this nature strengthened protective factors at individual, family, and community levels (Flanagan et al., 2018).

As others have observed, CCIs focused on neighborhood revitalization across social service sectors have not generated the sort of political action believed to be needed to improve the systemic issues facing underserved communities (Chaskin, 2001; Kubisch et al., 2002, 2010, 2011). As Henig and colleagues (2015, 2016) elaborate, where CCIs came up short could have been due to their broad, yet unfocused attention on aspects of community change that were desired. Cross-sector education collaborations symbolize a shift from CCIs precisely because they are primarily education-focused. This specificity in cross-sector collaboration mission and purpose may help refine desired outcomes and approaches to harnessing community power for educational change (Henig et al., 2015, 2016).

Some evidence suggests that the scope of partnership can be linked to improved educational outcomes. Domina and Ruzek (2012) explored effects of “programmatic” or “comprehensive” K-16 partnerships in California between school districts and universities on high school graduation rates and college access in California's higher education system by exploiting variation in timing for when different districts began

partnerships between 1990 and 2005). Programmatic partnerships focused on one educational intervention or program between the K-12 school district and postsecondary institution (e.g., tutoring services, teacher training). Comprehensive partnerships not only built new programs, but also created different institutional arrangements and policy frameworks to make more widespread changes across a district and its educational policies. Their findings suggested that K-16 partnerships had no immediate effect on district on-time high school graduation rates, but over the long-term (10 years or more), graduation rates improved particularly in districts with a comprehensive partnership. While there was no effect on college enrollment in the University of California system, districts with comprehensive partnerships also had higher enrollment rates at California State University institutions and community colleges than those without (Domina & Ruzek, 2012).

Varied evidence on specific kinds of cross-sector education collaborations (e.g., Promise Neighborhood, college promise program) also demonstrates that certain initiatives can have promising educational outcomes. In terms of academic achievement measured by math and reading test scores, experimental and quasi-experimental evidence from the Harlem's Children Zone, the program in which federally-designated Promise Neighborhoods are modeled, suggested that math and reading achievement improved due to attending an HCZ elementary, enough to close Black-white achievement gaps by third grade, and math performance improved in middle school, enough to close Black-white achievement gaps by ninth grade (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). The authors argued that the school environments seemed to matter more to increased student achievement than other neighborhood-based programming provided in the zone (e.g., early childhood

programming, after-school activities, or college success programming) in comparisons with students and their siblings who lived in and outside of the HCZ (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011).

Increasing student test scores is not the main driver for many comprehensive education initiatives, however. Evidence from a subset of college promise programs, sometimes known as place-based scholarships, that include broader goals of changing local college-going culture and spurring economic development in addition to financial awards for postsecondary education (e.g., Pittsburgh Promise, Say Yes to Education, Kalamazoo Promise) shows emerging signs of positively impacting related educational and economic development outcomes (e.g., LeGower & Walsh, 2017; Leigh & González-Canché, 2021; Page et al., 2019; Sohn et al., 2016; Swanson et al., 2020). Using difference-in-differences methods, the Kalamazoo Promise, for example, appeared to increase college enrollment for eligible students by eight percentage points (with a 9 to 13 percentage point increase at four-year institutions) and six-year completion rates by about 9 to 12 percentage points (Bartik et al., 2015). Through difference-in-differences and regression discontinuity approaches, the Pittsburgh Promise resulted in a 5-percentage point gain in college enrollment, also primarily at four-year institutions (Page et al., 2019). Eligible students were also 10 percentage points more likely than non-eligible students to attend a Pennsylvania institution, and 4 to 7 percentage points more likely to enroll and persist into the second semester (Page et al., 2019).

Descriptively, several other cross-sector education collaborations are also documenting improved educational outcomes in their communities. Riehl and colleagues (2019) note that in their four cases they describe emerging outcomes (Say Yes Buffalo,

All Hands Raised, Northside Achievement Zone, and Milwaukee Succeeds), the collaborations have commissioned external evaluations or collect data themselves. Through combinations of data dashboards and annual reports, and to a lesser extent, other rigorous evaluations, these cross-sector education collaborations document several indicators of improvement, such as in early literacy growth (Milwaukee Succeeds), high school graduation (Say Yes Buffalo, All Hands Raised), and postsecondary enrollment rates (Say Yes Buffalo) (Riehl et al., 2019). Riehl and colleagues (2019) conclude that despite the many ways a range of cradle-to-career data are tracked and analyzed, “collaborations perform an important community service in combining this information and making it available for public consideration” (p. 100).

Other attempts have been made to understand, on a national scale, how cross-sector education collaborations may be contributing to community outcomes. Looking across collaborations in the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, a national evaluation by a third-party evaluator, Equal Measure, used surveys from the member network collected annually from 2015 to 2017 to track reported progress on building “civic infrastructure” in their communities. Those with increased civic infrastructure levels also seemed to be contributing to growth in indicators of educational outcomes measured for their collaborations (Equal Measure, 2019).

How these positive educational outcomes are achieved is still not well understood. Some emerging work suggests that network composition and integration play an important role as do other citywide postsecondary strategies. Social network analyses of the collaborative environments created among the CCIs of the New Communities Program in Chicago illuminated differences across neighborhoods in community capacity

and leadership, bearing out on the types of outcomes achieved by different communities. The social network analysis distinguished between neighborhoods that had tightly connected, or integrated, organizations compared to those that did not. Those with more integrated networks were more successful at implementing different educational and community development initiatives such as community-school partnerships, commercial corridor development, beautification activities, and developing business improvement districts (Greenberg et al., 2017). The analyses also highlighted political brokers in communities who were able to change local public policies and create stronger relationships with elected officials. Networks in neighborhoods that could combine neighborhood political organizing and service delivery effectively had important advantages to communities not as able to do so (Greenberg et al., 2017).

In a different study focused on understanding how six cities that competed for the Kresge Foundation's National Talent Dividend \$1 Million Prize Competition worked to increase their number of college graduates between 2011 to 2014, the authors identified how cross-sector collaborations existing in five of the six study sites may have increased degree attainment (Rutschow et al., 2017). Strategies implemented in these partnerships that appeared to increase degree attainment most included cultivating large dual enrollment programs or two- to four-year transfer programs (Rutschow et al., 2017). Employer-college relationships, typically developed for internships at four-year colleges and in curricular and programmatic partnerships for two-year colleges, also seemed to be an effective strategy for raising postsecondary degree attainment in these cities (Rutschow et al., 2017). The authors concluded that being in states or institutions investing in large-scale financial or student support programs, as well as not discounting



the role of short-term credentials and certificates, also contributed to raising degree attainment in their communities (Rutschow et al., 2017).

### **Educational equity impacts**

Few studies about cross-sector education collaborations focus directly on issues of equity despite explicit goals embedded in the collaborations for reducing educational disparities in communities (Banks, 2017; Edmonson & Zimpher, 2014; Equal Measure, 2017b; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Riehl et al., 2019). Establishing what equity work looks like in cross-sector education collaborations is also underexplored.

Achieving educational equity is likely both about processes undertaken within the collaboration and resulting outcomes. In the context of cross-sector education collaboration research, researchers are just beginning to unpack educational equity to further push the potential of cross-sector education collaborations to address long-standing issues within their communities. In their case studies, Riehl and colleagues (2019) describe the how their study sites all “openly acknowledged the presence of inequities of educational opportunity and achievement in their context” (p. 102), but address issues around racial and socioeconomic equity in varied ways. For example, Say Yes Buffalo has “steered clear of some of the more direct conflicts over racial equity in the local system” (Riehl et al., 2019, p. 102) whereas others have made racial equity front and center. Racial equity is centralized for All Hands Raised in Portland, Oregon, perhaps due to being a heavily white city with a long history and perception among communities of color that the city did not take seriously issues of racial equity despite its veneer of social progressivism (Riehl et al., 2019). The authors observed that, in communities where racial tensions run high, “colorblind language about equity and a focus on

universal solutions might seem a safer and more palatable approach...” (Riehl et al., 2019, p. 111). Other sites in their study, namely Providence and Nashville, displayed “the least explicit attention to racial equity” and instead promoted more “quality improvements and “universal solutions” as “stand-ins” for potentially other equity-based approaches (Riehl et al., 2019, p. 111)

Several collaboration sites included in their equity efforts different ways to handle education data about different groups in their communities. For instance, Milwaukee Succeeds both visualized “contextual and contributing indicators that affect students’ ability to meet developmental milestones...” (Riehl et al., 2019, p. 107), while creating an interactive dashboard that disaggregates several educational measures by race, ethnicity, income level, and other categories. For Savannah’s Youth Futures Authority, data disaggregation by race was one strategy to make outcomes more transparent for all stakeholders. But, opening wider conversations to different audiences about racial disparities, namely in Black and white communities in Savannah, were not as well-sustained after leadership transitions and funding changes took hold (Riehl et al., 2019).

## **Summary**

Robust literature exists for understanding components of and forces that are relevant to understanding cross-sector collaborations, though this research is not rooted in educational contexts (e.g., Austin & Seitanidi, 2014; Bryson et al., 2015; Clarke & Crane, 2018; Gazley, 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Despite these advances, research on cross-sector education collaborations is typically not grounded in this literature and instead builds on prior work on the purposes and functioning of comprehensive community initiatives and developing community capacity (Chaskin, 2001; Kubisch et al., 2002,

2010, 2011). Lessons drawn from research on the initial conditions, structure, processes, and outcomes of cross-sector education collaborations come from a range of work, including several reports (e.g., Henig et al., 2015, 2016; Riehl et al., 2019) and third-party evaluations (e.g., Equal Measure, 2017a, 2017b), and to a lesser extent, peer-reviewed empirical literature (e.g., Ishimaru 2014, 2019; Riehl & Lyon, 2017). Case study designs are often used (e.g., Riehl et al., 2019) given that understanding facets of collaboration requires understanding the contexts of communities and their histories, but these studies are also not generalizable outside of their contexts. More empirical work comparing different cross-sector education collaboration cases is just emerging (e.g., Riehl et al., 2019).

To further inform knowledge of cross-sector education collaborations, this study moves from identifying the relevant conditions, processes, and structures of collaboration to identifying how these forces play out through practices among collaborating organizations. More specifically, I focus on the relationships between collaboration processes and structures in one set of activities for a cross-sector collaboration: their work in improving postsecondary degree attainment. This focus extends the literature in two ways. First, this study informs the kinds of outcomes that might be expected and what materially changes in practice when organizations orient themselves towards collaboration to achieve specific goals – in this case, raising postsecondary degree attainment (Henig et al., 2016; Riehl et al., 2019). Second, this study works to bridge insights across disciplines on cross-sector collaboration to improve conceptual understanding of how cross-sector education collaborations enact different strategies to promote and achieve their intended goals. Third, this study probes how equity-related

concerns and outcomes emerge in the work of cross-sector collaborations as they ostensibly strive to achieve equity-related goals.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

To understand the practices, policies, and processes of postsecondary readiness, access, and completion strategies implemented in cross-sector education collaborations, this study employs a case study design. Case study is appropriate to help explain a “contemporary phenomenon” (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). To some (Stake, 2005), case study research is “not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2005, p. 134), whereas to others (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014), case study represents both a kind of qualitative study and a methodology. Case studies therefore can both be an object of study and a product of inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

### **Defining the Cases in Case Study Research**

Selecting cases to analyze requires choosing an event, entity, or phenomena that can be defined as the unit of analysis (Yin, 2014). This unit of analysis typically exist in a “bounded system,” whether that be by time, place, or some other feature (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). In this study, the case is one cross-sector education collaboration bounded by several characteristics. First, the collaboration is bounded by the state and region in which it is located. While the collaboration involves multiple stakeholders to effect change across the educational pipeline, these stakeholders are generally locally based and are affected by local economic, social, and historical trends. Second, the collaboration is bounded by its design and structure, including having a central “backbone” agency and then multiple organizational partners who work within the parameters of the backbone. Within the case is an embedded unit of analysis – the group of stakeholders who focus on

postsecondary readiness, access, and completion activities within the collaboration. This embedded analysis is most relevant to answering my first research question understanding what strategies such stakeholders employ to improve postsecondary readiness, access, and attainment. The focus on postsecondary strategies continues to help bound the case while highlighting processes and practices that illuminate how collaborations organize their work to towards community-wide educational improvements.

### **Case Selection**

The cross-sector education collaboration selected in this study is Graduate Tacoma. This case was selected primarily for its maturity and structure as part of the national StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network of cross-sector education collaborations. Collaboration maturity, both years in existence and solvency as an organization, is an important selection criterion since collaborations in the first two to three years of establishment may not provide as in-depth reflections on what organizations have implemented as cross-sector partnerships go through different stages of development (Selsky & Parker, 2005). As collaborations mature, they enter an implementation stage in which different partnership and capacity building activities are executed. Over time, collaborations may reach a stage where there are measurable indicators of progress or failure towards collaborative social goals (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Graduate Tacoma demonstrated evidence of being a more mature collaboration, having been incorporated as a nonprofit in 2010, with full-time staff hired, evidence of ongoing planning and events on their website, and evidence of a data infrastructure (via public data dashboards) to observe progress on postsecondary outcomes.

As a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, Graduate Tacoma also exhibited structural components common across cross-sector education collaborations developed to promote collective impact ideals. Founded in 2010 by Nancy Zimpher, the Chancellor of State of New York University system, and Jeff Edmondson, then Executive Director of the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati, StriveTogether was intended to be a knowledge hub to support communities interested in cross-sector work to improve educational outcomes (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; StriveTogether, 2018a). The national network was meant to build off the collective impact strategies in the Strive Partnership of Cincinnati (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). Prior to becoming an independent 501c3 nonprofit in 2017, StriveTogether operated as a subsidiary organization of KnowledgeWorks, a social innovation organization that provides both capital and capacity building strategies to improve educational opportunities (KnowledgeWorks, 2021; StriveTogether, 2017).

Each StriveTogether cross-sector collaboration organizes its work around seven cradle-to-career outcomes for improvement: kindergarten readiness, early grade reading, middle grade math, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary completion, and employment. Through StriveTogether's Theory of Action, collaborations are also expected to establish a backbone agency to organize collaboration work, creating baseline data reports to be shared community-wide, and build work groups, also known as "Collaborative Action Networks" or CANs, to help sustain collaborative action across outcome domains (StriveTogether, 2018a). Graduate Tacoma's structure mirrors these different components in StriveTogether's Theory of Action, making it presumably a good

representation for other similarly structured collaborations in this national network of collaboration.

Graduate Tacoma also exhibited improved performance outcomes, based on data StriveTogether collects and reports to monitor progress across member collaborations.

Collaborations monitor their progress across four pillars for achieving “systems change:”

1) building a shared community vision, 2) using evidence-based decision making, 3) creating collaborative action, and 4) ensuring investment and sustainability.

Collaborations report progress on a spectrum for each of these pillars ranging from being at an “exploring,” “emerging,” “sustaining,” stage that leads to “systems change.”

Communities can receive “proof point” status in the StriveTogether Network when they meet at least four “systems change” benchmarks along the four pillars and show ongoing

improvement on at least four of the seven cradle-to-career outcomes (StriveTogether,

2019). Communities also must document reductions or eliminations of disparities

between groups in at least two of the seven cradle-to-career outcomes (StriveTogether,

2019). In the updated 2019 StriveTogether Theory of Action, systems change status can

lead to “systems transformation” if there is evidence of ongoing improvement across at

least four cradle-to-career outcomes, reductions or eliminations of disparities across four

outcomes, and other partner benchmarks met, especially in seeing changes in adjacent

sectors like health, housing, or other human services that impact youth and families

(StriveTogether, 2019). Figure 4 documents how the 70 cross-sector education

collaborations in StriveTogether were distributed by these benchmarks in both 2017 and

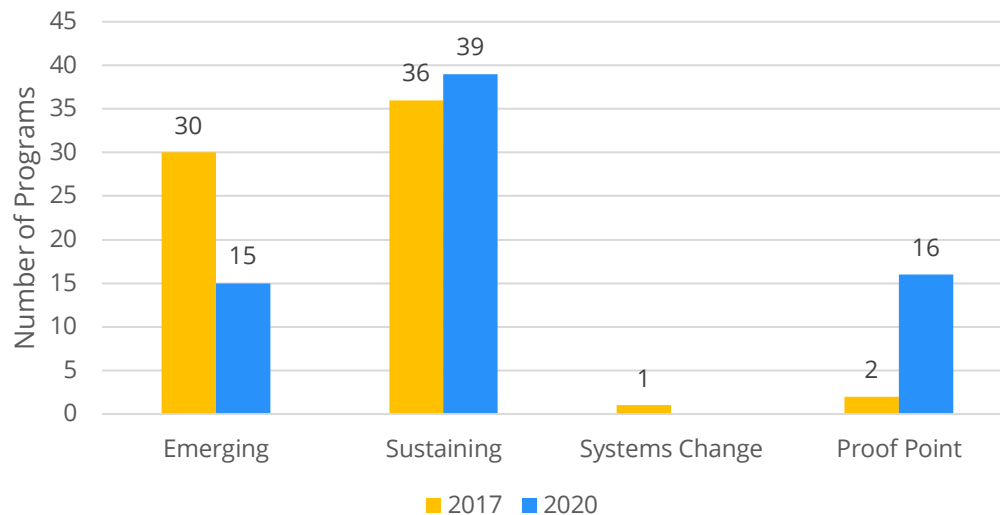
2020. Most collaborations are categorized as “sustaining” progress, but there has been a



large increase in “proof point” communities named since 2017, which includes Graduate Tacoma.

**Figure 4**

*StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network Category Distribution in 2017 and 2020*



*Source.* StriveTogether representative, personal communication, July 28, 2020

Graduate Tacoma received “proof point” status in 2018 (Jancarz, 2018), a designation only 23% of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network collaborations hold (StriveTogether representative, personal communication, July 28, 2020). This information suggested that Graduate Tacoma would be a promising site to explore the activities and strategies for increasing postsecondary attainment. The documented improvements in high school graduation rates for Tacoma made the site ideal for exploring whether various practices within the collaboration were helping to translate improved graduation rates into improved postsecondary-related community outcomes.

### **Data Collection and Sampling**

As a methodology, case study research relies on multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, interviews, observations, other artifacts) to build rich case descriptions,

individual case findings, and the subsequent development of cross-case themes, where applicable, that illuminate reasons why particular processes occur within the context of the phenomenon explored (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). This study primarily relied on data collected from interviews with collaboration stakeholders, and information gathered from documents, publicly available databases, and other reports.

### **Gaining Access**

I began initially gathering data about the StriveTogether Network in the winter and spring of 2018 to develop possible research questions and study designs that would help me understand the nature of cross-sector collaborations. At the April 2018 annual conference of the American Educational Research Association in New York City, I attended a session led by Nancy Zimpher, founder of the StriveTogether Network, briefly connected with her about my interests in understanding these collaborations further and was subsequently connected to a StriveTogether senior manager to further discuss the collaborations within the Cradle to Career Network that might help achieve my goals. After gathering insight from StriveTogether staff members about trends and directions for the network as well as refining my site selection criteria, I asked their staff if they would facilitate connecting me to potential sites with a brief introduction to enhance my credibility with collaborations unfamiliar with my purposes as I had no previous relationship to the organizations.

In early fall 2018, I set up phone calls and discussed my initial research questions and proposal with leaders at Graduate Tacoma. In October 2018, I visited Tacoma to meet with staff contacts at each site to discuss the research project and answer questions. During that trip, I met with my site contact at Graduate Tacoma and another

organizational partner in the postsecondary Collaborative Action Network, the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN). I also acted as a participant observer at the organization's citywide Cradle to Career Luncheon held at the Greater Tacoma Convention Center. As Graduate Tacoma's annual convening to "acknowledge, amplify, and express deep appreciation to the community partners that serve Tacoma students each day from cradle to career," (Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, 2018), the Cradle to Career Luncheon provided insight into the stakeholders involved in Graduate Tacoma and the messaging to community members of its priorities and progress towards goals.

There were also other advantages to completing this work in Washington. I am originally from Kenmore, a city in the Seattle suburbs, and so I was generally familiar with the region. I also previously learned about Graduate Tacoma through a friend and education practitioner who reached out to my eventual program contact on my behalf. Concurrent with another research project occurring in Seattle, I was able to leverage my familiarity and residential connections to have productive meetings and establish rapport with site partners.

After these initial discussions and meetings, Graduate Tacoma staff formerly signed a memorandum of understanding in November 2018 that laid out the purpose of the study, project timeline and expectations, and descriptions of how data would be collected and utilized for the study. I received formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study in December 2018, clearing me to begin formal data collection with participants. Only data collected from participants after IRB approval are used in further analyses.

## **Interviews and Interview Protocol**

Between January and September 2019, I conducted 26 interviews with stakeholders and observers within Graduate Tacoma. I conducted seven interviews in-person at different offices or public locations in Tacoma, with one interview in Seattle. The remainder of the interviews (n=19) were one-on-one phone calls. The interviews provide insight into the contextual reasons for how partners attribute programmatic or policy changes in their organizations due to collaboration, what kinds of practices are prioritized to improve postsecondary readiness, access, and completion, and how partners define and practice equity as they seek to advance systems change in their communities.

I relied on purposeful sampling to identify participants with insight on the collaboration operations, organization, and/or postsecondary readiness, access, or completion strategies and landscape. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) summarize, purposeful sampling “means that individuals are purposefully chosen to participate in the research for specific reasons, including that they have had a certain experience, have knowledge of a specific phenomenon, reside in a specific location, or some other reason” (p. 128). My approach encompassed key informant, snowball, and maximum variation sampling strategies (Patton, 2015 as cited by Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To gain a variety of organizational perspectives, I sought out at least one representative from each organization type involved in the collaboration’s postsecondary work, including the K-12 school district, postsecondary institutions, city elected officials or civil servants, and nonprofit college access and transition partners. I interviewed housing and other sector representatives who had knowledge of general collaboration functions or postsecondary activities specifically. Several stakeholders were selected because they had knowledge

about the collaboration’s history and evolution. My site contacts provided ongoing insight and support for identifying participants. Most participants were mid-level program managers or senior leaders in their respective organizations; only one participant was entry-level staff with one to three years of work experience. See Table 1 for the organizational affiliations of the 26 interview participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Interview Summary*

Organization Type	Graduate Tacoma
Backbone	3
City	3
School District	3
Nonprofit	7
Postsecondary Institution	8
Housing	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>

Participants were recruited via e-mail. In my e-mail, I provided a synopsis of the study, invited them to schedule a time to interview through an online scheduling tool, and ensured informed consent from all participants (see Appendix A). Interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded using a handheld recorder and backup recording via the audio-to-text function for the Otter.ai phone application. I used the text files created by Otter.ai and manually edited the transcription for two interviews. For all other interviews, I used Rev.com to professionally transcribe the interviews.

I structured the interview protocol drawing primarily on the cross-sector collaboration conceptual frameworks discussed in Chapter 2. To ensure my interview

protocol reflected the multilevel nature of collaboration processes and structures (Bryson et al., 2015), I grouped interview questions across three levels of analysis: 1) network, 2) organization/participant level, and 3) community level (Provan & Milward, 2001).

Participants answered questions associated with each level in a semi-structured fashion.

Network level questions focused on how the network has grown or changed, range of services provided, commitment to network goals, and how the work of the backbone agency evolved. I categorized these as “origins, issue, and mission” questions aligned to van Tulder et al.’s (2016) framework as they generally served to understand the social issue being addressed by the network and its overall mission and purpose.

Organization and participant level questions focused on how participants’ organizations were adapting to collaboration, and how they saw services being changed in the collaborative network in general and with postsecondary practices specifically (Provan & Milward, 2001). From van Tulder et al.’s (2016) framework, a portion of these questions are “input” questions that take into account “resources and capabilities (money, staff time, capital assets, and commitment) provided to achieve the partnership’s mission” (p. 9), which can include public, private, or other community actors.

“Throughput” questions focused on the actual postsecondary strategies, activities, and implementation of practices within partner organizations. These questions also included attention to what were considered equity-driven practices and to what extent those practices were emphasized. A last set of questions at the organization/participant level were “output” questions, assessing if objectives of the collaboration had been met for the organization.

Community-level questions assessed whether participants perceived social problems being addressed, changes in service arrangements, and costs to the community. Tied to van Tulder et al.'s (2016) evaluation framework and the interconnections between collaboration processes, structures, outcomes and accountabilities elaborated upon by Bryson et al. (2015), these questions aligned with “outcome” and “impact” questions on whether participants felt there were shifts for individuals or the community or other short or long-term effects attributed to the collaboration. Crafting the interview protocol in this way ensured that I covered critical topics related to understanding cross-sector evaluation in cross-sector collaboration. See Appendix B for the interview protocol.

### **Documents, Publicly Available Data, and Other Data Requests**

I also collected documents and publicly available data on the collaboration, its organizational partners, and community educational outcomes both to inform interviews and to triangulate information from interviews later. Graduate Tacoma regularly updates a rich set of information available on their websites, including program planning documents, event listings, annual reports and strategic plans, and interactive data dashboards tied to district, state, and proprietary (e.g., National Student Clearinghouse) data to publicly display progress and monitoring of cradle-to-career outcomes. I also requested more specific information from my site contacts, such as more recent meeting agendas and minutes for their postsecondary-focused CAN, and action planning documents. I also asked to be added to the appropriate listservs to receive e-mails for their network-wide newsletters and CAN-focused content. My site contact made materials and access available on request.

To understand local contexts, forces, and trends for students on their path to and through college, I collected publicly available demographic and economic data from the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau, the K-12 school district, and other school-level administrative data from Tacoma Public Schools (TPS). I utilized IPEDS for postsecondary institutional information and gathered other trend data from local and state data repositories (e.g., city workforce development agencies, state K-12 and postsecondary education agencies). I also searched for local news sources to better understand the current education policy and finance climate (e.g., budget cuts) and track the history and evolution of the cross-sector collaborations. To understand financial resources for Graduate Tacoma including the types of grants received, I also reviewed Form 990s through the Internal Revenue Service and ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer databases and used the Foundation Directory Online database through my university's institutional access.

### **Observations**

In addition to attending a public meeting prior to IRB approval, once I received formal study approval, I also observed one CAN meeting in January 2019 with Graduate Tacoma's Tacoma College Support Network during in-person fieldwork. I followed an observation protocol from Yin (2014) to capture content and structure of this meeting (see Appendix C). The protocol was organized to capture the meeting details (e.g., time, location), facilitators and meeting participants, discussion topics and questions raised, as well as capture reflective notes during observation.



## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in case study design and other types of qualitative research occurs throughout the data collection phase of a study and continues as one reduces the data, verifies information through other supporting documents, archival records and/or other types of supplementary material, and then visualizes or synthesizes that data to make formal conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). While there are “few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes” in analyzing case study data (Yin, 2014, p. 133), there were several data organizing principles I followed to aid in my data analysis as well as ensure trustworthiness and reliability of my findings. Most relevant to my study was ensuring that I used multiple sources of evidence, created a case study database, and maintained a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014).

Using multiple sources of evidence develops “converging lines of inquiry” to substantiate claims and findings in case study research (Yin, 2014, p. 119). Use of multiple types of evidence assists in data triangulation to improve construct validity and bolster the events, patterns, and conclusions drawn out from the case study (Yin, 2014). Throughout my data analysis processes, whenever possible, I corroborated participants’ recollection of different events, facts, figures, or other patterns with at least one other source. I usually relied on documents, secondary data sources, other consistent mentions of activities across interview participants, and member checks to confirm accuracy of information, especially when participant accounts may have conflicted.

A second principle involved in case study research is the need to create a case study database, an organized compilation of all the different types of data collected from which conclusions are being drawn (Yin, 2014). The purpose of a case study database is

to easily retrieve documents used to develop and support claims and to establish an audit trail that can later aid in analysis of the case. From the initial data gathering to form the basis of this research study, research questions, and contexts under investigation to moving through data analysis and conclusions, I amassed a considerable amount of data mainly including interview transcripts, documents, archival records, and less so from different observations. In addition to organizing these documents into folders on my computer grouped by their topic or source, I also organized interview transcripts, memos, and other brainstorm in NVivo 12 as well as kept a short journal for jottings that I used during data collection.

To ensure that I also maintained a chain of evidence and made sense of the growing evidence in my case study database (Yin, 2014), I produced periodic memos throughout the data collection process. These memos capture reflections on notable themes across interviews. I also produced memos during the coding process to continue reflecting about strengths and weaknesses or major changes in my coding scheme. I conducted different phases of coding for my interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2016). Those phases involved: 1) precoding, 2) initial inductive and deductive coding, 3) developing a case description, 4) recoding to align more concretely with cross-sector collaboration conceptual frameworks.

### **Precoding**

Ravitch and Carl (2016) describe precoding as an initial phase of data analysis that is a form of open coding involving reading and engaging with collected data to generate preliminary codes from key words or passages from notes. My precoding process happened both through writing periodic memos after interviews with my

participants as well as through reading interview transcripts in their entirety as they became available to me from my transcription service. While making corrections in the transcripts to obvious typos or misspellings as needed, I allowed myself to be immersed in the conversations without taking structured notes or directly coding the transcripts. I also turned to different documents already collected or conducted additional internet searches to read more about some policies or practices that were being mentioned across participants to help me understand my participants' references and shape potential codes.

### **Initial inductive and deductive coding**

After reading through the corpus of transcript data and reviewing relevant documents, I began the process of inductively coding portions of the interviews, where codes emerge from the data rather than from other theories or frameworks (Emerson et al., 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This strategy aided in organizing information referencing Graduate Tacoma in general – its history, mission, leadership, funding mechanisms, and structure – and coding portions of text related to the embedded case of the Tacoma College Support Network.

Grounded in Perna (2006)'s propositions for the kinds of activities that are relevant to understanding postsecondary enrollment and to help answer my first research question, I also began coding for different college access practices mentioned by participants. Additionally, I began to group comments related to advancing equity into its own category.

After several readings of the interview transcripts, I also developed a set of a priori codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2016) leaning on my initial literature review and frameworks that helped me structure my interview protocol in understanding

impacts in cross-sector education collaborations (e.g., van Tulder et al., 2016). Some codes addressed collaboration processes (e.g., building trust, building leadership) or various conflicts/tensions/barriers in collaborative work. I also began differentiating and determining codes that captured how participants were discussing different kinds of results or outcomes from being part of the TCSN or broader Graduate Tacoma effort. The initial coding scheme was applied to all interview transcripts.

### **Developing a case description**

I then began connecting pieces of coded data together by developing a case description (Yin, 2014). To help build reliability in case study design in the form of a final case study report, creating a case description helped track how information within the case study database helped to both describe the case and begin to answer specific research questions (Yin, 2014). This process ultimately helped me organize and synthesize critical aspects of the case study and allowed me to see potential gaps in my narrative and areas in my coding scheme that could be improved upon to make conclusions clearer.

The case description first involved detailing the background context and origin story for Graduate Tacoma. I also included descriptive information about relevant context for the city, its school district, and the postsecondary context. In trying to understand how practices within the TCSN were prioritized for postsecondary success in a collaborative context, I also added to the case description several different policies or practices also integral in Tacoma's educational environment that were mentioned by participants or emerged from other document exploration. The latter portions of the case description began to spell out what impacts, if any, participants described for the collaboration.

Figuring out how to best organize these emerging kinds of outcomes helped me reconsider aspects of my coding scheme that I later amended.

### **Recoding and refining cross-sector collaboration outcomes**

Codes were refined further as I reflected on the conceptual model for cross-sector collaborations. I returned to Bryson and colleagues' (2015) updated cross-sector collaboration conceptual framework and van Tulder et al.'s (2016) impact framework for assessing cross-sector collaborations to more directly map data on perceived outcomes for member organizations internally and in their work within the cross-sector collaboration. By drawing on these relevant frameworks (Bryson et al., 2015; van Tulder et al., 2016), I was able to identify relevant forces to attend to when investigating the milieu of postsecondary-related activities executed by the cross-sector collaboration under investigation. Perna's (2006) conceptual model for college access and choice promoting an ecological and contextual understanding of the intersecting forces shaping postsecondary-related behavior generated further analytical guidance into what aspects of cross-sector collaboration activities may be most relevant when analyzing postsecondary-related strategies and their relationship to potential population-level changes in postsecondary readiness, access, and completion. Ultimately, returning to these frameworks helped organize nuances in implementation and suggested outcomes of collaboration among organizational members in the TCSN. I wrote a memo about these changes and found several other places, especially in discussing collaboration processes, where codes were consolidated or reorganized into subcodes that better captured the phenomena being described.

### **Researcher positionality**

From the inception of this study, my aim has been to understand the promising practices within cross-sector education collaborations and explain what and how changes might occur across collaborating organizations, especially regarding postsecondary access and improving equity. While tackling this project as a researcher, how I have conceptualized the issue and questions, and the challenges faced in analyzing and summarizing findings are rooted in my own experiences working in multiple sectors of education on postsecondary readiness, access, and completion issues. I did not work in a formal cross-sector collaboration, but my background includes firsthand experiences implementing programs and policies in a middle school classroom as a public-school teacher, managing and building programming and partnerships across different agencies doing college access work in Philadelphia, and serving on various nonprofit volunteer and working boards dedicated to educational and social service causes for marginalized communities. From these vantage points, I know how critical cross-sector education collaborations are for addressing barriers for students throughout their education and how many pitfalls and difficulties exist in truly leveraging multiple systems to improve opportunity in education for historically minoritized and marginalized communities. I came by doing this work with a sense of hope and optimism that deeper organizational changes were occurring in practice but also a healthy skepticism that, despite the rhetoric and appeals for collaboration, many initiatives were that in name only and would otherwise run “business as usual.”

Throughout the data analysis process, I aimed to temper times when I might both feel impressed by what the cross-sector collaboration had accomplished and when I might

judge collaborative activities for their perceived limited aims or purposes. I aimed to listen to each participant to understand their reasoning and justification for decisions or perceptions. These mindsets reinforced the importance of understanding community and collaboration contexts to make conclusions about how cross-sector collaborations implement their postsecondary readiness, access, and completion work as well as the importance of triangulating information among multiple sources to reach the study's emerging conclusions.

### **Trustworthiness**

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative studies is one way to help readers understand whether study conclusions are based on presumptions or whether they provide validity to research findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggests that establishing trustworthiness requires establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Based on Nowell's (2017) interpretation of these concepts as they relate to developing thematic analyses, credibility – or whether experiences described by the research “fit” with researcher representations – often happens through prolonged observation, data collection triangulation or researcher triangulation. I relied most heavily on data collection triangulation to bolster credibility in this study, looking for at least two to three different sources to verify trends or identify perceptions in outcomes.

I also conducted member checks with three key informants at the study site to ensure I accurately captured discussions of the history and nature of the collaboration and filled in remaining questions to clarify connections between different events. Feedback from member checks was minor. One member discussed changes occurring in the

collaboration after the study period and edited some of their direct quotes for clarification. Another member provided additional supporting documents to verify details about the timeline of events for how the TCSN eventually merged into Foundation for Tacoma Students and the Graduate Tacoma movement. A third member provided clarifications on the governance of the TCSN and connected me to someone familiar with the early days of Graduate Tacoma who did not originally participate in the study. I followed up with this contact who provided further insight over e-mail into how Tacoma 360, Foundation for Tacoma Schools, and the TCSN evolved together in the early days of Tacoma's educational collaboration history.

Transferability describes how generalizable a study may be to other contexts, which can be facilitated through thick descriptions of events or accounts to provide a deeper picture of a process or phenomena (Nowell, 2017). I worked to develop thick descriptions of events in writing notes, drafting a case report, and synthesizing findings by spending ample time both describing the history of Graduate Tacoma and its intersections with the TCSN. I also relied heavily on theoretical constructs related to the organization of cross-sector collaborations to make sense of my findings.

Dependability ensures each step in the research process is logical and clearly documented in ways that readers can follow or potentially replicate. The case study research database organizing documents and transcripts, short memos, and descriptions of coding changes helped to ensure that others can observe how I arrived at conclusions and the underlying data to support those conclusions.

Finally, confirmability is meant to ensure that "findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations



have been reached” (Nowell, 2017, p. 3). Often confirmability can be assessed through how well credibility, transferability, and dependability have been reached, developing audit trails, and reflecting on the data collection and data analysis process throughout the research study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I addressed confirmability issues primarily by maintaining a case study research database and writing memos at key decision points in data collection and analyses.

## **CHAPTER 5: CASE DESCRIPTION OF GRADUATE TACOMA**

Graduate Tacoma is the moniker for a community-wide movement of partners to improve educational outcomes in Tacoma, Washington. The movement is coordinated and led by its backbone organization known as the Foundation for Tacoma Students, which was incorporated formerly with 501c3 status as an organization in 2010. Foundation for Tacoma Students was built from prior community organizing efforts around education as well as through the emergence of a loose collective of organizations that would eventually become the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN), the main coordinating body organizing postsecondary readiness, access, and completion work for the collaboration. Ten years later, the cross-sector collaboration is comprised of five “Collaborative Action Networks,” or CANs, which incorporate the work of over 265 partners (as of 2019) including the Tacoma Public Schools (TPS), local government, public-private partnerships, nonprofits, colleges and universities, and local industry. This chapter provides both background on Tacoma’s city history and educational landscape, chronicles the emergence of Graduate Tacoma and the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN), and provides other background context on how Graduate Tacoma is structured and funded.

### **City History and Context**

Nestled around a natural harbor overlooking Commencement Bay to the north and Mount Rainier (also known by its indigenous name, Tahoma) looming in the east, the present-day City of Tacoma rests on the tribal lands of the Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin, Steilacoom, and Muckleshoot Native Americans (Pierce County, n.d.). White settlers began arriving in 1832 when George Vancouver and Peter Puget sailed inland exploring

areas along what is now Puget Sound and present-day Seattle and when the Hudson's Bay Company established a permanent trading settlement in Tacoma that same year. When the Northern Pacific Railroad chose Tacoma as its northwest terminus in 1873 and finished its transcontinental link from Minnesota in 1883, the city population and its lumber, coal, and wheat industries boomed (Wilma & Crowley, 2003). Tacoma's two private postsecondary institutions were founded during this time – University of Puget Sound in 1888 (University of Puget Sound, 2020) and Pacific Lutheran University in 1890.

While the region faced an economic depression like the rest of the country from the Panic of 1893, its access to different waterways along the Green and Nisqually Rivers brought new opportunities to rebuild the economy. However, real estate developers at this time took almost three fourths of the Puyallup Reservation for industrial development (Wilma & Crowley, 2003). With the now-combined U.S. Army's Joint Base Lewis-McChord built in 1917 and the Port of Tacoma built in 1918, Tacoma and Pierce County developed into an important industrial hub for the region that has lasted until the present day, but at the expense of recognizing the rights of its indigenous communities.

The region also remains in economic competition with Seattle, located 39 miles north of the city. When World War II began, Tacoma again became a work destination and active site for steel production. African Americans from the Deep South were recruited to work in Tacoma war plants, residing in homes left vacant by Japanese Americans who were forcibly sent to internment camps by 1942 and who mostly did not return to the region after the war (Wilma & Crowley, 2003). The African American population in Tacoma rose from 650 in 1940 (.6% of city population) to 3,205 (2.3% of

Tacoma's population) by 1945 (Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, n.d.; Wilma & Crowley, 2003).

Tacoma joined federal pilot project efforts for postwar urban renewal, created in the wake of the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. These projects remade much of its downtown and created new transportation access points, including the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and Interstate 5. The economic significance of the region shifted towards King County and Seattle with the establishment of Boeing and Microsoft's move to Bellevue in 1979 (Vleming, 2020). Throughout the 1970s and at present, the Port of Tacoma remained an important hub for container shipping with links to Alaska and Asia.

The Tribal reservation of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians includes part of the east side of Tacoma and northeastern portions of Pierce County. The Tribe has over 4,500 official tribal members as of July 2016 and the Reservation has an estimated resident population of over 14,000 (Puyallup Tribe of Indians, 2017). According to U.S. Census Bureau 2018 estimates, the Puyallup Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Lands include 51,407 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Through the Puyallup Land Claims Settlement of 1990 (Wigren, 2017), the Tribe was able to reinstate legal right over lands that now include portions of the Port of Tacoma and different waterway industries. The Puyallup Tribe owns and operates the Emerald Queen Casinos, the sixth largest employer in the area.

In the present-day, Tacoma is a mid-sized and growing city. It has an estimated population of 212,869, an increase of 7.1% from its 2010 population of 198,819 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2019). The city is majority-white, with 64.8% of the city's

population identified as White alone. The city's Black or African American population is decreasing, making up 11.5% of the city in 2010 and about 10.5% of the city population in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2019). The Asian population is increasing, up from 7.4% in 2010 to 8.8% in 2019. Those residents of two or more races are also increasing (6.7% in 2010 to 9.5% in 2019) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2019). American Indian or Alaska Natives make up 1.6% of the population and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders make up 1.1% of the city's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Those residents identifying as Hispanic or Latinx also increased from 2010 (10%) to 12% of the city population in 2019, mostly identifying as Mexican (72.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Strong economic growth in King County and the growing presence of software, Internet, and other technology companies in the Seattle area create economic pressure on Pierce County and Tacoma, the county's largest city, to compete for jobs and business investment (Vleming, 2020). Almost half of Pierce County's workers commute outside of the county for work. Over 100,000 workers commute to King County every day, where wages are higher than Pierce County for competing industries (Workforce Central, 2016).

Healthcare services make up the largest private employers in Pierce County (Economic Development Board for Tacoma Pierce County [EDB], 2020) and healthcare and social assistance jobs are expected to be the fastest growing sector for the region (Workforce Central, 2019). The Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the State of Washington, City of Tacoma, and Pierce County Government are the five largest public employers in Pierce County (EDB, 2020). In Pierce County, jobs requiring a postgraduate degree are expected to grow at the fastest rates - by 1.8% per year over the next ten years as

measured by annual average projected job growth compared to 1.4% for those requiring a bachelor's degree (1.4%) and 1.5% for those with a 2-year degree or certificate (1.5%) (Workforce Central, 2019).

Despite decreasing unemployment rates (from 10.4% on average annually in 2010 to 5.4% in 2019) and projected employment increases in Pierce County (Employment Security Department, 2020; Vleming, 2020), Tacoma is still poorer than the rest of the county and state. Tacoma's median household income was \$62,358 in 2019, lower than the county median of \$72,113 and state median household income of \$78,687 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Average annual wage growth in Pierce County has lagged behind the state since the Great Recession (Workforce Central, 2020). About 14.6% of Tacomans are in poverty, a higher rate than in Pierce County (10.4%) and Washington state (9.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

As the economy continues to boom in the Seattle-King County region, and with housing costs on the rise in Seattle, more residents are moving to Pierce and other nearby counties that have lower costs of living (Vleming, 2020). Tacoma residents – especially low-income residents who rely on housing vouchers to compete in the private housing market - feel the effects of competition for affordable housing. As a Tacoma Housing Authority representative indicated:

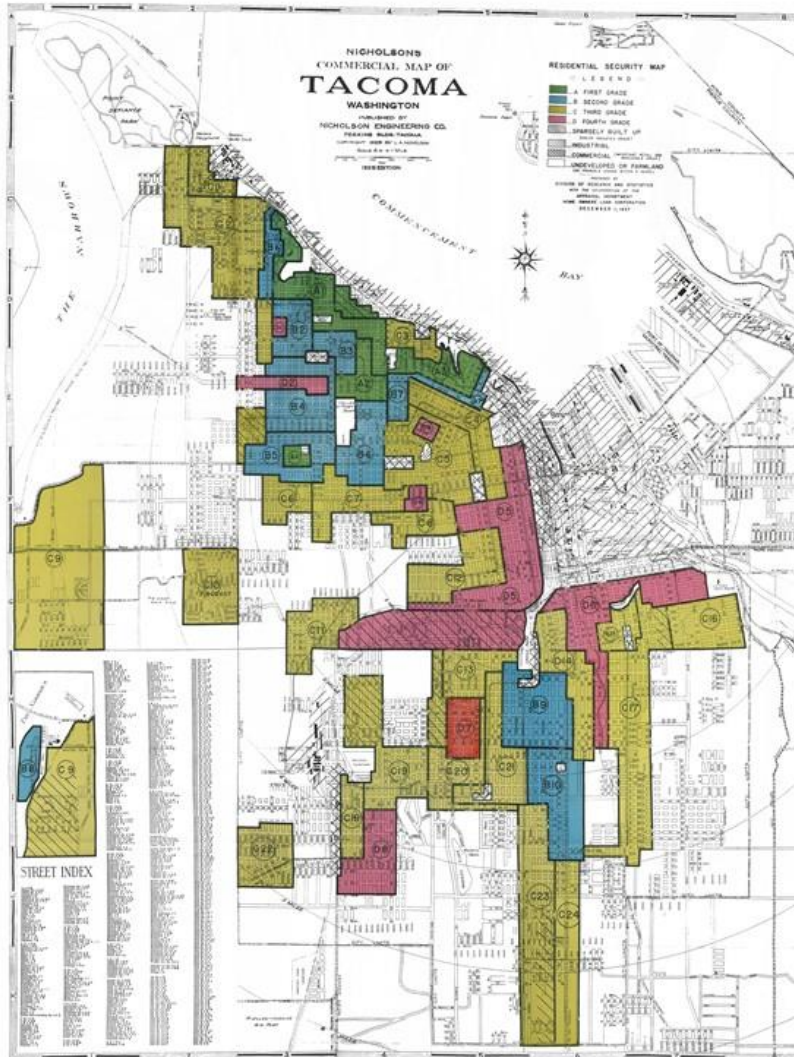
So, what's happening in the landscape in the Northwest right now is the price in housing in Seattle is growing exponentially which is displacing more and more individuals further and further south. So, what we're seeing is somebody comes from Seattle to pay cash, first, last month deposit all while their sitting there in front of a leasing agent. And then you have somebody that comes in who says, "I have this voucher and I need to make payments on my security deposit, I can't pay last month's rent, and I'm homeless." Unfortunately, the person with the cash is going to get a unit before this person with a voucher. (GT.12)

The median home value in Tacoma was \$354,019 in March 2020 (Zillow, 2020). This value has increased since April 2010 by 68%, reflecting the view that Tacoma is a “hot market” city as continues to absorb the influx of Seattle area residents moving south.

Like other metropolitan areas, inequalities in Tacoma also manifest themselves geographically. Historical legacies of discrimination and racist redlining practices that effectively barred Black families and other racially minoritized groups from purchasing homes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century still leave an imprint on where opportunities lie in Tacoma neighborhoods (Hillier, 2003; Perry & Harshberger, 2019; Rheingold et al., 2001). As depicted in the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) map for Tacoma (Figure 5), Tacoma’s North End and West End neighborhoods were considered more favorable areas in which to provide housing loans compared to most of South Tacoma.

**Figure 5**

*Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) Map for Tacoma*



*Notes.* Green zones represent those areas with Grade A (the most favorable category) by HOLC, representing about 5% of the city. Blue zones represent Grade B ("still desirable"), making up about 16% of the city's area. Yellow zones, representing 63% of the city, were labeled Grade C ("definitely declining"). Red areas, making up 16% of the city, were labeled Grade D ("hazardous").

*Source.* Nelson et al. (n.d.)

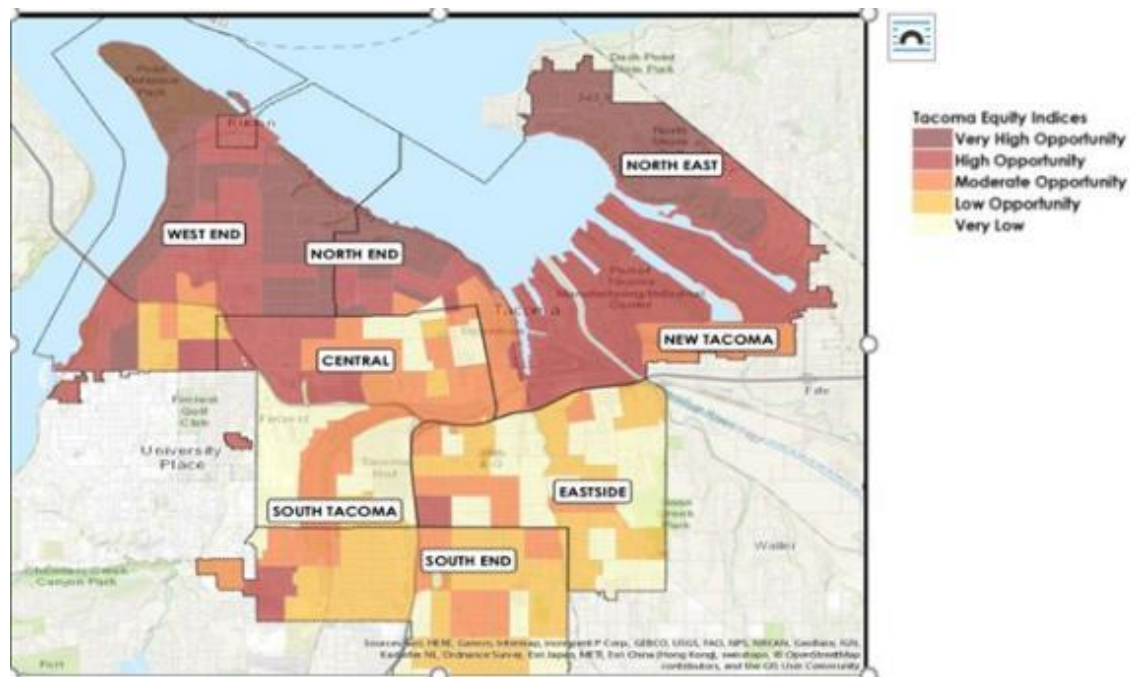
These neighborhood differences in housing loans still map onto areas of inequity in Tacoma today. Based on the City of Tacoma's Equity Index, a tool used by city government staff and community members to understand disparities across Tacoma neighborhoods, Figure 6 shows differing opportunity levels as calculated across 20



indicators accounting for accessibility (e.g., transit options, internet access), education (e.g., high school graduation rate, bachelor’s degree attainment), economic health (e.g., household income, unemployment rate), and livability (e.g., Tacoma Crime Index, Tacoma Nuisance Index). South Tacoma, the South End, and the Eastside continue to be rated as areas with low to very low opportunity compared to the North End, West End, and North East sections of Tacoma.

**Figure 6**

*Opportunity Levels in Tacoma Neighborhoods*



*Notes.* According to the City of Tacoma’s Equity Index, “Very High Equity represents locations that have access to better opportunity to succeed and excel in life. The data indicators would include high performing schools, a safe environment, access to adequate transportation, safe neighborhoods, and sustainable employment. In contrast, Low Equity areas have more obstacles and barriers within the area. These communities have limited access to institutional or societal investments with limit their quality of life.” Further descriptions of how indicators were tabulated are not available in the data documentation.

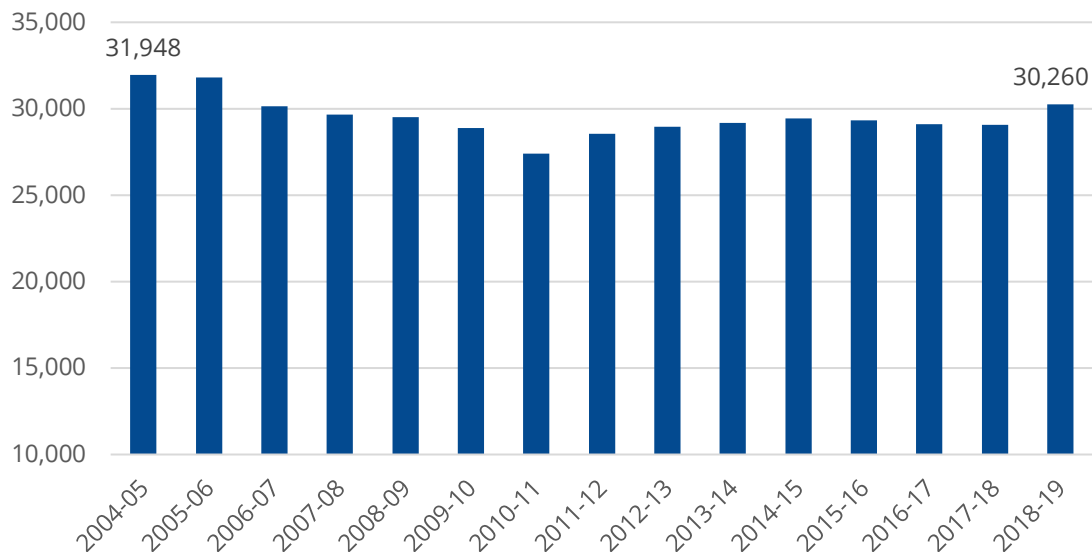
*Source.* City of Tacoma (2021)

## Tacoma's K-12 Landscape

In the 2018-19 school year, the TPS enrolled 30,260 students, a number that is 5.2% lower than in 2004-05 but has been on the rise since 2010-11 (Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data [CCD], 2019) (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Total Enrollment in Tacoma Public Schools, 2005-2019*



Source. CCD (2019)

Compared to the city itself, the TPS student body is more racially and socioeconomically diverse. About 62% of TPS students are low-income, 11% are English Language Learners, 16% have a disability, and about 5% are homeless (Washington OSPI, 2019). The district in 2018-19 consisted of 38.3% White students, 13.9% Black/African American students, 13.6% two or more races, 9.1% Asian students, 3.1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 1.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native

students. About 20.9% of the student body is Hispanic/Latinx (of any race) (Washington OSPI, 2019). Between the 2014-2015 and 2019-20 school years, TPS' multiracial population grew 125%, its Hispanic/Latinx population grew 13%, and its Pacific Islander population grew by 21% whereas its Black, White, and Native American populations all decreased over this period (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b; Washington OSPI, 2019).

The system has 10 high schools, 11 middle schools, and 35 elementary schools and supports 4 early learning centers (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020a). Among the 10 high schools, student enrollment varies (see Figure 8). Student enrollment has typically been growing at School of the Arts (SOTA), the Science and Math Institute (SAMi), and the School of Industrial Design Engineering and Art (iDEA), three of Tacoma's state-designated "innovative" high schools.<sup>1</sup> Enrollments at Lincoln and Wilson high schools are also increasing.

Major changes in K-12 financing formulas in Washington state have also impacted the TPS. The TPS has faced budget shortfalls in recent years. In 2007, a lawsuit filed by two families against the State of Washington, known as the "McCleary case," accused the State "for not meeting its constitutional obligation to amply fund a uniform system of education" (Washington Courts, 2020, para. 1). In 2012, the Washington Supreme Court ruled in favor of the families, finding that the State was violating its constitution by underfunding its K-12 school system (O'Sullivan, 2018). In response to the court mandate, the State included an 11.4% increase in K-12 basic education funding

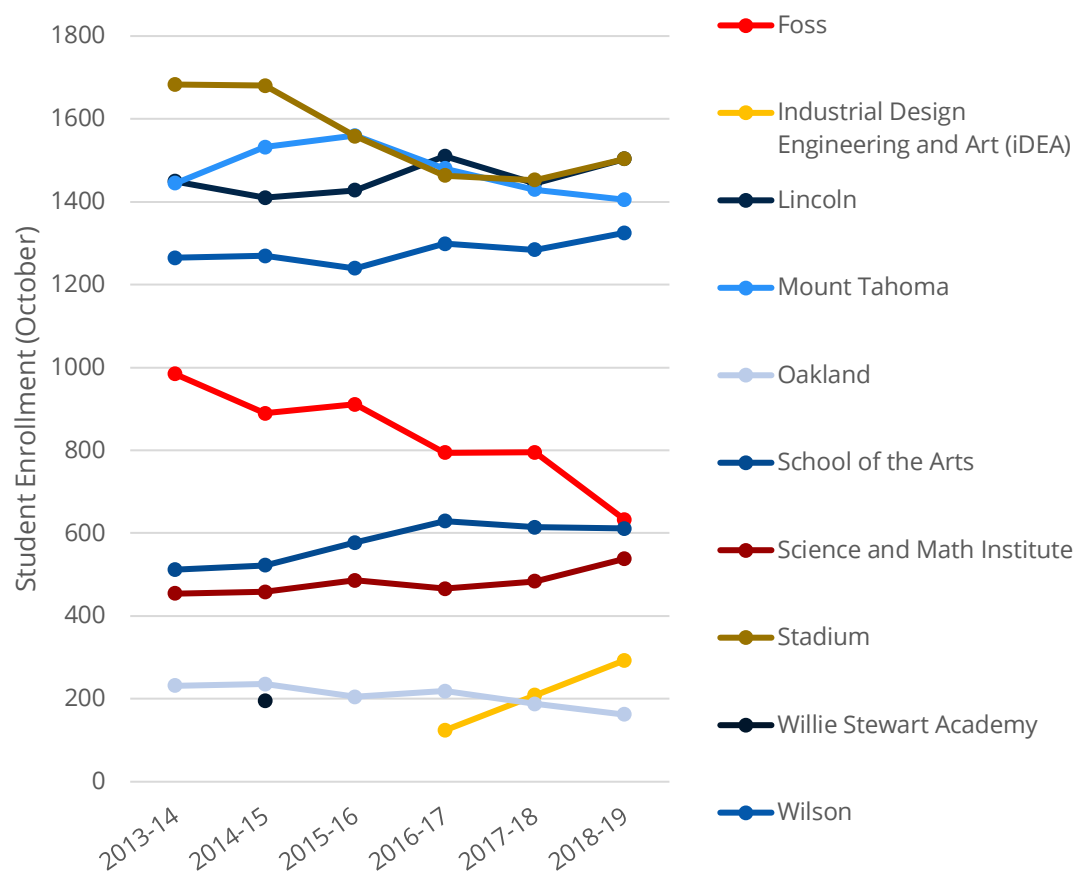
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<sup>1</sup> HB1521 passed in 2011 to identify "innovative schools" in the state demonstrating "high expectations for students and teachers," "providing students with an array of educational options", "and partnering with parents and their communities" (Revised Code of Washington, 2011). The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has designated 34 schools in the state as innovative schools (Washington OSPI, n.d.a, n.d.b).

during its 2013 legislative session. However, the Court found the legislature’s plan in contempt of court in 2014 “for the first time in history” (O’Sullivan, 2014, para. 1) - in addressing full funding of personnel, essential materials, supplies and operating costs, and transportation (Bartlett, 2018; Washington Courts, 2020).

**Figure 8**

*Student Enrollment by Tacoma Public High School, 2014-2019*



*Notes.* 2013-14 data were pulled in Winter 2019 when 2013-14 data was publicly available; the current website gives 2014-15 data to present. The school year begins on different days for different school districts. The first business day in October is used as the enrollment count date for all schools and districts in Washington state. Willie Stewart Academy closed in 2014-15 and is now a re-engagement center.  
*Source.* Washington OSPI (2019)

The Court not only required a plan to address full funding of the K-12 system by the 2017-18 academic year, but due to continued noncompliance, also instituted a

\$100,000-a-day fine on the State for falling short of its goals. In 2017, Governor Jay Inslee and the state legislature approved a plan raising the state property tax rate in 2018 while putting levy caps on local school districts. These levy caps limited how much future tax revenue local school districts could collect through local levies in order to comply with the court that major basic funding needed to be covered by the state (O’Sullivan, 2018). In 2018, the Court declared that the state had satisfactorily implemented a new basic education plan in accordance with the initial order (The Supreme Court of Washington, 2018).

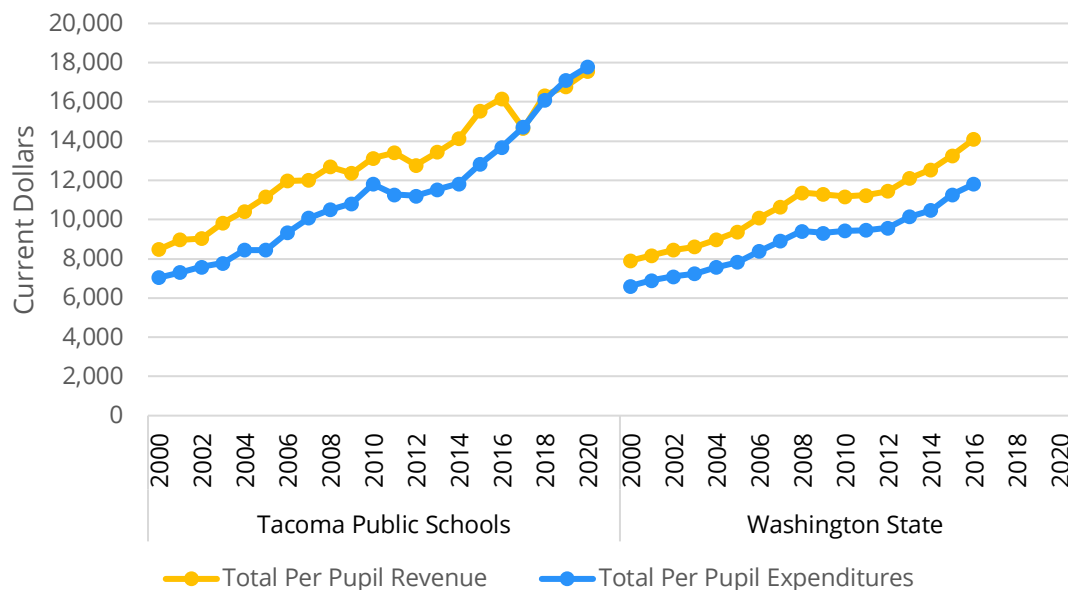
Despite more state dollars for public K-12 education resulting from the McCleary case, not all school districts in Washington fared better (Sundell, 2019). Limiting the ability for school districts to raise local revenue via levies despite more state revenues still threatened about 253 of 295 school districts with budget deficits (Morton & Bazzaz, 2019). For TPS, rather than being able to collect a full \$71 million in a voter-approved levy from February 2018, the district could only collect \$43 million, resulting in about a \$30 million deficit for 2019-20. Despite a fix by the state legislature, which would allow TPS to collect all \$71 million by January 2020, TPS still needed to cut 156 staff positions in the 2019-20 school budget (Hanchard, 2018; Needles, 2019b).

As part of the McCleary decision, school districts were also required to fully fund teacher salary increases in 2018. Disputes in 14 school districts with teachers’ unions in Washington state, including in Tacoma, resulted in mass teacher strikes at the beginning of the 2018 school year. After a weeklong strike in Tacoma, TPS teachers received a 14.4% salary increase instead of the initial 3.1% offer (Robinson, 2018; Will, 2018). Examining total revenue and total current expenditures per student for the TPS between

2000 to 2020 (see Figure 9), current expenditures beginning in 2018-19, and projected for 2019 and 2020, are meeting or exceeding expected revenues while, historically, TPS has primarily kept expenditures less than its revenues over time.

**Figure 9**

*Revenues and Expenditures per Pupil for Tacoma Public Schools and Washington State, 2000-2020*



*Notes.* Figures show fall of academic year (e.g., 2000 is for AY2000-01). AY2017-18 and on come from author's calculations of F-195 Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal Reports to OSPI (Washington OSPI, 2021). AY2019-20 and AY2020-21 are based on budgeted and projected figures vs. actual figures.

According to NCES, current expenditures are "comprised of expenditures for the day-to-day operation of schools and school districts for public elementary and secondary education, including expenditures for staff salaries and benefits, supplies, and purchased services. They exclude expenditures for construction, equipment, property, debt services, and programs outside of public elementary and secondary education, such as adult education and community services" (Institute for Education Sciences, National Center of Education Statistics, 2018, para.4)

*Sources.* CCD (2019); Tacoma Public Schools (2021); Washington OSPI (2021)

For 2020-21, TPS projected another \$7 million budget deficit, accounting for about 2% of the total 2019-20 budget of \$480 million (Needles, 2020). During data collection for this study, the budget cuts in 2019-20 were predicted to have major impacts

on Graduate Tacoma's work within the TCSN in the schools. A Graduate Tacoma staff member explained:

They [Tacoma Public Schools] also have gone through some huge budget cuts [...] So one of the things that's going to be a real challenge for us next year is all of our college and career counselors that were embedded in each of the high schools, they have lost funding...and they're pulling those folks back and they're going to try to deploy them out of the central administration. They're going to be maybe assigned to more than one school at a time. (GT. 26)

### **Tacoma's Postsecondary Landscape**

Postsecondary attainment overall is rising among Tacoma residents. In 2010, only 17.7% of adults aged 25 and older held a bachelor's degree or higher and just 6.8% had an associate's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). By 2019, the share of Tacomans, ages 25 and older, holding a bachelor's degree or higher increased to 29.7% and 9.7% held an associate's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Increases in postsecondary attainment, however, may be due to new residents with college degrees moving into Tacoma, as postsecondary attainment is declining for Tacoma Public School graduates – an issue that will be further discussed.

The Greater Tacoma area and Pierce County is home to eight postsecondary institutions, with five located within Tacoma's city boundaries. Table 2 describes differences among these institutions in more detail. Of 34 community and technical colleges (CTCs) in the state, five CTCs are in the Greater Tacoma area: Bates Technical College, Clover Park Technical College, Pierce College Fort Steilacoom, Pierce College Puyallup, and Tacoma Community College (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges [WSBCTC], 2020b).

**Table 2***Institutional Characteristics of Pierce County Postsecondary Institutions*

	<b>Bates Technical College</b>	<b>Clover Park Technical College</b>	<b>Pacific Lutheran University</b>	<b>Pierce College Fort Steilacoom</b>	<b>Pierce College Puyallup</b>	<b>Tacoma Community College</b>	<b>University of Puget Sound</b>	<b>University of Washington- Tacoma</b>
Total enrollment (Fall 2019)	4,445	3,905	3,207	6,067	4,453	6,242	2,666	5,354
% FTE enrollment	64	75	96	66	59	77	98	90
% American Indian or Alaska Native	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
% Asian	3	7	10	6	6	6	7	18
% Black or African American	5	11	4	9	6	6	2	9
% Hispanic/Latinx	8	11	11	15	14	10	9	14
% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
% Two or more races	3	10	9	13	10	8	8	8
% White	47	50	58	46	54	44	69	41
% Race/ethnicity unknown	32	7	3	6	7	20	4	2
Total cost of attendance (Fall 2019)	6,497	5,740	58,258	18,301	18,408	4,419	68,146	27,596
Graduation rate (150% of normal time)	48	41	67	26	30	25	76	58
Pell Grant Graduation rate (150% of normal time)	70	35	64	23	19	28	77	52

*Notes.* Total cost of attendance for Bates Technical College, Clover Park Technical College, and Tacoma Community College reflects total in-district tuition and fees as costs for living on campus not reported in IPEDS. For all other institutions, total cost of attendance includes in-district tuition, fees, and living on campus costs as reported in IPEDS. Graduation rate of first-time, full-time degree or certificate-seeking students is based on a 2012 cohort at 4-year institutions and 2015 cohort at less-than-4-year institutions. Pell Grant graduation rate reflects first-time, full-time degree-seeking students.

*Source.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2019, Institutional Characteristics component.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>

While Clover Park Technical College, Pierce College Fort Steilacoom, and Tacoma

Community College offer bachelor's degree programs, they primarily grant associate's

degrees.<sup>2</sup> Tacoma is also home to one public four-year research institution – University of

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<sup>2</sup> Clover Park offers a Bachelor's in Applied Science (BAS) degree in Operations Management and Supervision (Clover Park Technical College, 2021); Pierce College Fort Steilacoom offers a BAS in Teaching for Early Childhood Education and in Dental Hygiene (Pierce College, 2021a, 2021b); Tacoma Community College offers three BAS programs in Applied Management, Health Information Management, and Community Health (Tacoma Community College [TCC], 2021a)



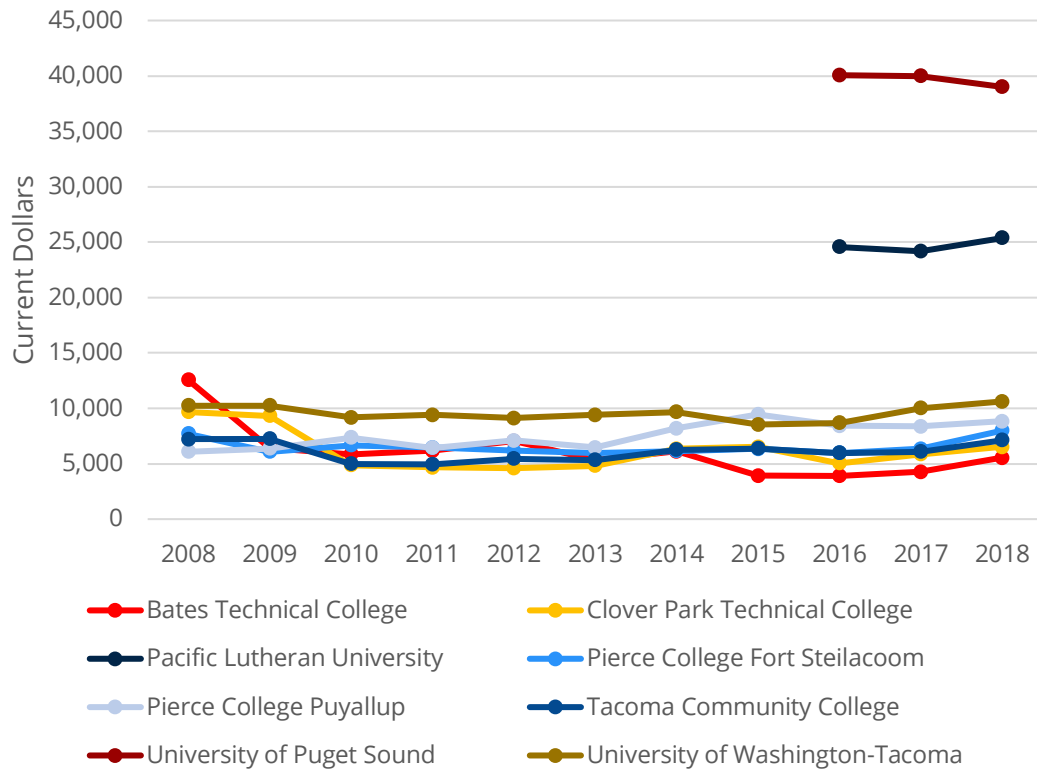
Washington Tacoma (UWT) – and two private four-year institutions, Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) and University of Puget Sound (UPS).

The postsecondary institutions range widely in who they serve. According to Fall 2019 enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Clover Park Technical College served the highest shares of Black or African American students (11%). Pierce College Fort Steilacoom (15%) and Puyallup (14%), as well as UWT (14%), served the largest shares of Hispanic or Latinx students. Pacific Lutheran University and University of Puget Sound are historically white institutions serving much higher shares of full-time students than the other local postsecondary institutions. While Clover Park Technical College serves the highest shares of first-time, full-time Pell Grant recipients (52% in 2017-18), UWT serves the highest share of Pell Grant recipients among four-year institutions (45% in 2017-18).

Mirroring national trends, Tacoma’s private universities are more expensive than its public options, based on average net price, defined as the price charged to first-time, full-time students after subtracting any grant or scholarship aid from the cost of attendance. However, average net prices (adjusted for inflation) at all local institutions except for Pierce College Puyallup decreased between Fall 2008 and Fall 2018, suggesting students are receiving more grant aid from federal and state sources to cover tuition and fees (see Figure 10). For example, average net prices dropped 62% at Bates Technical College and 41% at Clover Park Technical College. Despite average net prices increasing across public four-year institutions nationally (Ma et al., 2019), the average net price at UWT has also decreased by 10% between 2008 and 2018.

**Figure 10**

*Average Net Price at Pierce County Postsecondary Institutions, 2008-2018*



Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008-2018, Student Financial Aid component.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>

Founded in 1990, UWT is a branch campus of the University of Washington-Seattle (UW), the state’s public flagship research institution, and plays a role in Tacoma’s overall effort to revitalize the downtown core and the region. Established with widespread community support, UWT came about through two parallel processes. On a state-level, the Washington State Legislature created the Higher Education Coordinating Board to develop a plan for public higher education, which included scoping out the viability of two potential UW branch campuses (Wadland & Williams, 2017). At the local level, the “Pierce County mafia,” a group of local leaders and state politicians

championed the need for a state university in the city (Wadland & Williams, 2017). Their vision included ensuring “an interdisciplinary focus,” “an identity separate from the main campus,” and access and affordability to ensure “its tuition would stay low to enable the largest participation of place bound citizens” (Wadland & Williams, 2017, para. 5). A UWT employee described the unique position of UWT in the community:

Because I work in an urban serving university that has a very unusual history where when the University of Washington was told by the Washington State Legislature, ‘You will open up two additional campuses’ and then there was a whole competition among cities in Washington state about who was going to get the campus. Tacoma fought really hard for this campus. And so we were - there's not a town and gown separation, right? The community wanted us; the community embraced us. They thought that we were [a] really important part of the revitalization of downtown and also were really looked to, to help think about their future economic viability. Not wanting to continue to move toward being a bedroom community for Seattle. (GT.06)

This history continues to shape UWT’s prominent role in the city. In the City of Tacoma’s Economic Development Strategic Plan 2020-25, for example, the development of the UWT campus facilities is tied directly to “commercial and industrial property activation” strategies. More specifically, the City supports growth of the UWT campus by enabling “UW-Tacoma and partners to ensure strategic and efficient permitting as well as the development of the sizable land capacity” given it is one of the City’s “economic engines” (City of Tacoma, 2019, p. 49). UWT embraces its “urban-serving university” mission to provide “access to students in a way that transforms families and communities” and seeks “to be connected to our community’s needs and aspirations” (University of Washington Tacoma, 2020a).

As the largest community college by enrollment size in the City of Tacoma, Tacoma Community College (TCC) also plays a prominent role in providing postsecondary access and attainment to Tacoma students. Founded in 1965 (WSBCTC,

2020a), TCC also has branch campuses in its community college district in Gig Harbor and the Washington Correction Center for Women (WSBCTC, 2020e).

Overseen by the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, TCC and Pierce County's other technical colleges implement a series of state-level policies that help advance student success. Through a statewide performance funding system launched in 2007 called the Student Achievement Initiative, Washington CTCs are awarded points based on how well they move students through college completion. Improvements were made in 2012 to emphasize the progression for students in developmental education by more measures than just the number of classes taken, providing more points for students who move past basic skills, providing more points for students through 45 credits, or one year of college, exhibit steady progress, and who ultimately complete a credential (WSBCTC, 2016).

To tackle remedial education barriers to postsecondary completion, Washington CTCs, along with public four-year universities, also joined a state agreement to accept college-ready level scores from 10<sup>th</sup> grade students on the state's standardized academic performance test – the Smarter Balanced Assessment (WSBCTC, 2021). Eligible students scoring over these benchmarks can be placed directly into college-level and credit-bearing courses in lieu of placement tests, like Accuplacer (WSBCTC, 2021). Students who do not meet the college-ready benchmarks in 10<sup>th</sup> grade are eligible in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades to take Bridge to College courses. If students earn a B or better in those courses, they can also bypass college placement tests to enroll directly into college-level, credit-bearing courses (WSBCTC, 2017).

Among other reforms and approaches to improve access, retention, and completion, the WSBCTC also instituted the Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) program, which has received national attention for its team-teaching approach to basic skills education and its efficacy in promoting credit accumulation towards a workforce credential or degree (Zeidenberg et al., 2010; WSBCTC, 2005, 2008). I-BEST students are paired with both academic and job-training instructors during each course who teach basic skills content together while allowing students to earn college credits. The approach, according to the WSBCTC, “challenges the traditional notion that students must move through a set sequence of basic education or pre-college (remedial) courses before they start working on certificates or degrees. The combined teaching method allows students to work on college-level studies right away, clearing multiple levels with one leap” (WSBCTC, 2020c, para.4).

Additionally, the state has other robust dual credit programming, including the dual enrollment programs Running Start and College in the High School. Signed into law in 1990, Running Start allows 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students to earn both high school and college credits at any of Washington’s CTCs without paying tuition (only other course fees, books, and transportation) (Washington OSPI, 2020; WSBCTC, 2020d). Within the City of Tacoma, Tacoma Community College serves the most students in Running Start (as of 2018-19), making up about 4% of the total Running Start population in the state. TCC (and UWT) also participate in College in the High School, where partner colleges work closely with high school teachers to teach college-level courses in the high school. Students pay a reduced cost per credit for enrolling in those courses, and TCC also

provides further cost reductions based on free-or-reduced price lunch status (Tacoma Community College, 2021b).

### **Initial Conditions: Origins of Graduate Tacoma & Tacoma College Support Network**

Based on Bryson, Crosby, and Stone's (2006, 2015) conceptual model, cross-sector collaborations usually have a set of initial conditions that spark a cross-sector effort. Graduate Tacoma's origin story is intertwined with the origin of the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN), now its postsecondary access and completion arm, but originally a loose affiliation of organizations that predated Graduate Tacoma's formation. The TCSN and Graduate Tacoma primarily emerged due to two converging forces: the presence of sector failure, namely, low high school graduation rates, and initial community convening roles assumed by the City of Tacoma, TPS, and Metro Parks Tacoma. TCSN's evolution prior to Graduate Tacoma was also due to the convergence of interests among organizations to support students in signing up for a new state need-based financial aid program called the Washington College Bound Scholarship. Table 3 summarizes the different events as relayed by participants or corroborated by document analysis that were integral to establishing Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN.

Discussions about improving education and, specifically, high school graduation rates, were happening prior to the formalization of Graduate Tacoma in 2010 and the gatherings of the TCSN that began in approximately 2008. Several longtime stakeholders involved with Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN pinpoint the emergence of Tacoma community collaboration around education to a set of "Conversation Cafes" with different community organizations, culminating in the Get Smart Tacoma Education

Summit in May 2007.

**Table 3**

*Major Events in Graduate Tacoma and TCSN's Evolution*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Affiliated Partners</b>
<b>2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get Smart Tacoma Conversation Cafes (<i>February &amp; March</i>)</li> <li>• Get Smart Tacoma Education Summit happens (<i>May</i>)</li> <li>• “Dropout factory” articles in Associated Press, national and local news outlets (<i>October</i>)</li> </ul>	City of Tacoma, Metro Parks Tacoma, Tacoma Public Schools, Pierce County; multiple stakeholders citywide
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Washington’s state need-based grant, the College-Bound Scholarship, established</li> </ul>	Washington State Legislature
<b>2008 - 2009</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN) begins (approx. 2008)</li> <li>• First implementation year of College-Bound Scholarship, includes first <i>Tacoma is College Bound</i> event by TCSN (now College Bound Saturday)</li> </ul>	<i>Leads:</i> Tacoma Public Schools & College Success Foundation  <i>Partners:</i> Tacoma Housing Authority, Act Six (now Degrees of Change), Palmer Scholars, Bates Technical College, Tacoma Community College
<b>2009</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tacoma 360 established through interlocal agreement with City of Tacoma (<i>September 30</i>)</li> </ul>	City of Tacoma, Metro Parks Tacoma, Tacoma Public Schools
<b>2010</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tacoma 360 hires first director (<i>March</i>)</li> <li>• Foundation for Tacoma Schools received tax-exempt nonprofit status (<i>August 20</i>) – now seen as start year for Graduate Tacoma on official documents</li> </ul>	Tacoma 360, Foundation for Tacoma Schools
<b>2011</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tacoma 360 and community partners attend StriveTogether</li> </ul>	Tacoma 360, UWT, Foundation for Tacoma

	convening in Portland to learn more about collective impact	Schools, Tacoma Housing Authority, community funders
<b>2012</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First College Bound Saturday event (under new name) (<i>Spring</i>)</li> <li>• Community goal-setting meetings begin for potential merger of Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools (<i>Spring</i>)</li> <li>• Official merging of Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools (<i>End of year</i>)</li> </ul>	TCSN members, primarily College Success Foundation, Tacoma Housing Authority, University of Washington-Tacoma
<b>2013</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name change from Foundation for Tacoma <i>Schools</i> to Foundation for Tacoma <i>Students</i></li> <li>• Discussions begin for TCSN to become a Collaborative Action Network with Foundation for Tacoma Students (<i>May &amp; June</i>)</li> </ul>	Foundation for Tacoma Students, TCSN
<b>2014</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Graduate Tacoma” is used in Tacoma’s local newspaper to describe the new Foundation for Tacoma Students (<i>January</i>)</li> <li>• TCSN becomes CAN with Graduate Tacoma after approximately a year of discussions</li> </ul>	Foundation for Tacoma Students, TCSN

*Sources.* City of Tacoma (2009); Documents provided to author by Graduate Tacoma; Internal Revenue Service (2019); Interviews and personal communication

Core conveners of the initial summit included representatives of the City of Tacoma, TPS, Metro Parks Tacoma, and Pierce County (Weekly Volcano, 2007). One convener of the 2007 Summit noted that the events focused on “lifelong learning” in order to engage business and workforce development agencies alongside the K-12 community (GT.24). As explained by another community leader, the Get Smart Tacoma Education Summit



prompted a discussion among community members and city agencies that focused on middle school mentorship and students at risk of academically progressing:

And we did all sorts of facilitated discussion, trying to look at one thing that if we brought ourselves together that we could move the needle on. What would it be that might have an actual impact long term? And the outcome of that discussion was mentorship for every middle school child and of course starting at those that are more at risk and moving on from there. (GT.20)

These local convening activities laid the foundation from which Graduate Tacoma could later emerge to further connect how neighborhood and community organizations were understanding educational issues in Tacoma and address how to make long-term improvements in the city.

Crisis and sector failure also influenced the emergence of Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN. The summer and fall of 2007 was a pivotal time for the Tacoma education community. In August 2007, Art Jarvis was hired as interim superintendent for the TPS to replace the “tumultuous departure” of Superintendent Charles Milligan who had led the district for only one year prior (Seattle Times, 2007; Tacoma Public Schools, 2011). Art Jarvis would go on to serve as superintendent from 2007 to 2012 until he retired (Tacoma Public Schools, 2011). He was succeeded by Carla J. Santorno, still the current TPS superintendent at the time of this writing, who had served as deputy superintendent for TPS since 2009 (Shaw, 2009).

Coupled with these 2007 leadership transitions, several stakeholders also recalled the “personification of an existential threat” (GT.14) for Tacoma when national news headlines labeled TPS high schools as “dropout factories” given the high school graduation rate at the time hovered at 55%. Participants had conflicting recollections of the sources of these articles (e.g., *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*), and

their timing in the evolution of Graduate Tacoma, but participants consistently described how this coverage acted as another catalyst, alongside the emerging educational convenings, to improve educational outcomes for Tacoma students. One City of Tacoma leader described the worries of economic development stakeholders at the time who were “immediately alarmed because it's impossible to build a city where people want to come and enjoy the opportunity to live, work, and play successfully if you have a school district that's in such a horrible shape” (GT.14). Another TCSN member related, “By us, I mean certain high schools in Tacoma being labeled as dropout factories by, I don't remember if it was *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* or who it was back ten years ago or so. The focus was just, “Okay, we got to get these graduation rates up.” (GT.10)

I was unable to locate an article with this information in *USA Today*, *New York Times*, or *Washington Post*. However, national coverage posted on NBC News (Associated Press, 2007) and local coverage in the *Seattle Times* (Blankinship, 2007) and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (2007) from October 29, 2007, described research by Dr. Robert Balfanz and his team at Johns Hopkins University that detailed schools nationally deemed “dropout factories” (Toppo, 2015). According to this research, dropout factories were high schools graduating less than 60% of their freshman by senior year, based on three-year graduation rate averages calculated from the Classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006 from U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (Balfanz, n.d.). In the report, 1 in 10 high schools in the nation were “dropout factories.” Of 290 high schools in Washington State at the time, 22 high schools made the dropout factory list, including every public high school in the Tacoma Public Schools, the state’s third largest school

district by total enrollment at the time (CCD, 2019). Those high schools were Foss, Lincoln, Mount Tahoma, Stadium, and Wilson High Schools (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2007). By contrast, no high schools in the Seattle Public Schools, the state's largest school district, made the list (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2007).

### **Early Collaboration Activities of the Tacoma College Support Network**

With these convening activities and well-publicized failure for the TPS, the foundation was laid for both the TCSN and for two organizational entities – Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools – to emerge. Perhaps signifying the overlap between organizations involved in the establishment of Graduate Tacoma, participants involved before and after the formation of Graduate Tacoma in 2010 gave sometimes conflicting responses for when and how the TCSN originated and whether the work of the TCSN was tied to Tacoma 360 or the Foundation for Tacoma Schools. Interviews with stakeholders deeply involved in the early days of the TCSN suggest that the coalition of organizations began meeting to support student success in approximately 2008. A critical early implementer of work in the TCSN on behalf of the TPS described the informal nature of the TCSN's origins and shared goals among members:

So back in 2008 and 9, TCSN... my understanding had started in conversation from different civic organizations. Whether... and I can't remember if it was Tacoma 360, which no longer is around. But there's different organizations that just had an organic conversation about coming together, focusing resources and effort to support underrepresented populations' access to college. That's kind of where it started. Removing barriers, providing support, if we got on a common ground with that. So if different... if one organization is supporting the other, and another person or another entity wouldn't be in competition with that. So that's kind of where it started. (GT.26)

Another TCSN stakeholder involved prior to becoming part of Graduate Tacoma pinpointed the TCSN's origin as later, in approximately 2010. While the participant

inaccurately depicts Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools as the same organization, they suggest that the loss of a scholarship for students drew early TCSN stakeholders together:

TCSN may have started a little ahead of Tacoma 360. I wonder if the same non-profit just changed names. I think it did actually. The incorporation documents probably were that because it was several more years before they switched names to The Foundation for Tacoma Students. But I would guess that it was probably around 2010 that TCSN started because that's when The Achievers Scholarship was sunsetting. (GT.03)

The Washington State Achievers program was a 10-year investment by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the largest private scholarship in the state at that time, beginning in 2001 and slated to end by 2011 (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). The scholarship aimed to support low-income students in 16 high schools in Washington State, and was implemented in partnership with the College Success Foundation, a local college access organization based in Seattle that opened an office in Tacoma in 2009. According to this early TCSN stakeholder, based on their mutual interests in supporting students, the College Success Foundation in addition to two other local college access and completion nonprofits, Act Six and Palmer Scholars, banded together to search for large donors “who would commit something like a promise scholarship for Tacoma” (GT.03) to make up for the conclusion of the Washington State Achievers program. While unsuccessful at that time, this shared work led to a desire to “...keep talking about the work we're doing to support students” and bring new organizations into the fold (GT.03).

In contrast to formal agencies which are legally incorporated entities with board members, staff, and funding, the early threads of the TCSN were “really informal” (GT.03) and so I was not able to retrieve documentation identifying clearly when the

TCSN coalesced, and exactly which organizations started the collaboration. However, a report from the Tacoma Housing Authority (2014) reviewing its activities with the TCSN between 2008 to 2013 further substantiated TCSN's existence from at least 2008, describing that the "TCSN is led by the Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) district and the College Success Foundation, and over 40 community partners, including the THA." (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014, p.1). Other longtime TCSN stakeholders at different nonprofits, postsecondary institutions, and in TPS also reiterated the leadership role assumed by the TPS and the College Success Foundation in the creation of the TCSN. As a College Success Foundation representative familiar with the early work of the TCSN described, "...I thought it was very interesting how TCSN even prior to Graduate Tacoma was interested in outside organizations working with the school district to look at indicators and keep us all accountable of certain indicators (GT.16).

During this early phase, TCSN's primary activities included some attention to student attendance, but a stronger focus on ensuring students signed up for the state's need-based financial aid award - the College Bound Scholarship. An early TCSN stakeholder explained:

When I first started with TRIO, I was encouraged by my supervisor to attend what is now called the TCSN meeting. And the TCSN meeting really was just the gathering of community partners with the intent and focus on how holding some accountability or bringing forward some data points to what I like to call grasstops so we know the spectrum of what we're looking at. We used to focus a lot on student attendance and that kind of fell off the radar when Foundation for Tacoma Schools kind of absorbed TCSN and then the focus became College Bound and ... No, I'm sorry, the focus became College Bound before Foundation for Tacoma Schools absorbed it. And as I experience it now, we don't talk about attendance anymore. We don't talk about persistence, grade persistence year to year.

Established by the Washington state legislature in 2007, the College Bound

Scholarship covers tuition, some fees, and a \$500 book-allowance for low-income students. The program is intended to be combined with the Washington State Need Grant and act as an early commitment incentive to “inspire and encourage Washington middle school student from low-income families to prepare for and pursue postsecondary education” (Washington Student Achievement Council [WSAC], 2020). The application is a two-step process. First, students whose family meet the income requirements must “sign-up” by the end of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year by submitting an application. Students must also sign a pledge committing to graduate from high school with at least a C average (2.0 GPA), have no felony convictions, file the FAFSA or Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA), a state financial aid form for undocumented students, and have this pledge signed by a parent or legal guardian. Second, in the senior year of high school, students have their final income-eligibility determined by the FAFSA or WASFA. To be financially eligible, student family’s income must be within 65% of the state’s median family income. Foster youth in 7<sup>th</sup> grade up to age 21 are automatically enrolled in the program (WSAC, 2020a; WSAC, 2020b).

Leadership especially from the TPS, as well as from the College Success Foundation, brought TCSN members together to focus almost exclusively on the goal of getting 100% of eligible College Bound students to sign-up by the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Reflecting on the role of TPS, a Tacoma postsecondary education representative recounted, “I think, you know, the district had...was definitely involved, you know, throughout. We would meet at the district, and it was actually one of their assistant superintendents at the time who really was a good catalyst for getting... continuing to get us all together. But the focus was really narrow.” (GT.05) Another stakeholder described

more bluntly that College Bound Scholarship sign-ups “...for probably two or three or four years, that was really the only collective thing that we were doing.” (GT.03).

Increasing College Bound Scholarship sign-ups also seemed to promote collaboration among stakeholders in the TPS, the College Success Foundation, the Tacoma Housing Authority, and other members of the TCSN. Characterized as “an energetic and citywide collaboration” by the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) (2014, p.1), the THA not only described the ongoing collaboration with members of the TCSN in hosting a *Tacoma is College Bound* event every spring since 2008, but also provided several different kinds of in-house strategies to support the effort (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014, p. 10). These supports included adding the College Bound Scholarship application to their packet of paperwork already required by families living on their properties and having their Leasing and Occupancy Specialists provide College Bound Scholarship applications and information when meeting families for their already required annual reviews (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014, p. 10).

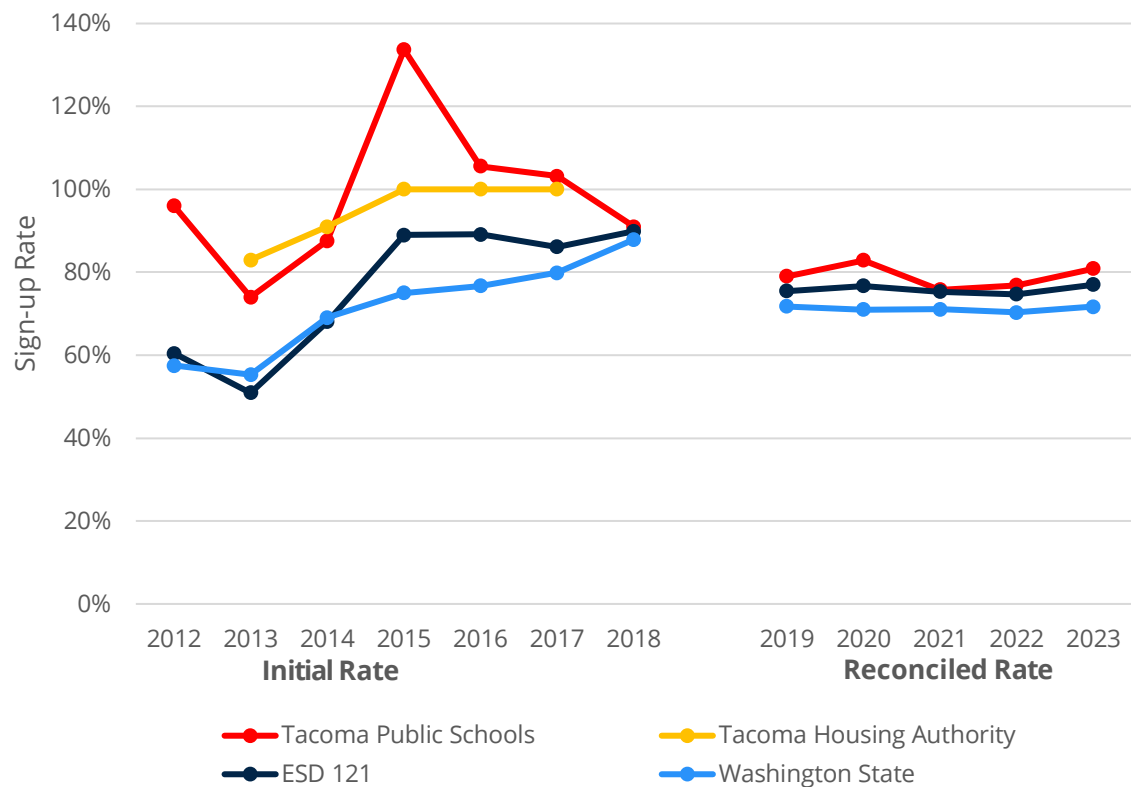
Additionally, in 2008 and 2009, THA sent targeted letters and brochures about College Bound Scholarship eligibility, with appropriate translations in the families’ dominant languages, to every family with a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grader living in its properties or participating in rental assistance programs. THA also distributed letters and brochures across all their housing sites and offices, included information in community newsletters, and allowed their AmeriCorps staff to continue helping families sign-up for the program. In the spring of 2009, THA also worked with TPS on a data-sharing agreement, allowing THA to identify which of its families had not enrolled in the College Bound Scholarship, and together with TPS and THA representatives, conducted 54 home visits to further

advise families (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014, p. 11).

These efforts, spearheaded by the TPS, the Tacoma Housing Authority, and other TCSN collaborators, helped the city reach the 100% College Bound Scholarship sign-up goal. Figure 11 displays data from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), which administers the College Bound Scholarship, for the share of students eligible to apply for the College Bound Scholarship who actually signed up by 8<sup>th</sup> grade across their graduating cohorts (2012 was the high school graduation year for the first eligible students in 2008).

**Figure 11**

*% of Eligible Students Signed Up for College Bound Scholarship by Graduating Cohort*



*Notes.* Years indicate the high school graduation class year for each group of students. For students eligible in the first year of College Bound Scholarship implementation in 2008, their graduation year was 2012. The



Washington Student Achievement Council changed their methodology for calculating College Bound sign-up rates after the 2012-2018 graduating cohorts, hence the difference between the initial and reconciled rates for 2019-2023 graduating cohorts. For 2012-2018 graduating cohorts, the initial sign-up rate was calculated dividing the number of applications completed from initial school on record when the application was submitted from the total number of Free and Reduced Price Lunch eligible students submitted to the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in the fall of the cohort's 7<sup>th</sup> grade year (the first-year students were eligible to apply for the College Bound Scholarship). For 2019-2023 graduating cohorts, the reconciled sign-up rate more accurately portrays the CBS-eligible group of students. The rate is calculated by dividing the number of students with complete applications attending a specific school/district at the end of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year by the number of students enrolled in that specific school/district at the end of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year who became eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch anytime during the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Sources.* Data request from Washington Student Achievement Council (2020c); Tacoma Housing Authority (2014)

While sign-up rate reporting methodology from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) has since changed, between 2011 and 2013 (for graduating cohorts 2015-2017), TPS signed up more than the eligible student population as measured by WSAC's prior reporting methodology, and consistently outperformed sign-up rates for the regional educational service district and for Washington State (WSAC, 2020c). Tacoma Housing Authority (2014) reported that 100% of students eligible within their housing facilities signed up for the program. These early wins for TCSN stakeholders set the stage for future work in their eventual merging with Graduate Tacoma.

### **Co-Mingling of Tacoma College Support Network & Graduate Tacoma**

Separate from the general evolution of the TCSN and its early College Bound Scholarship sign-up activities, Graduate Tacoma's organizational origins are rooted in the merging of two other entities, Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools, which also focused on supporting Tacoma students. First, in September 2009, with leadership and financial investment from the City of Tacoma, TPS, and Metro Parks Tacoma entered an interlocal agreement with the City of Tacoma, formalizing the Get Smart

Tacoma Education Summit conveners into an organization called Tacoma 360 (City of Tacoma, 2009). A copy of the original interlocal agreement indicated that Tacoma 360's function "shall be to serve the needs of the children and families in Tacoma and to advocate and create conditions for increased collaboration of school and community services around the needs of children and families of Tacoma" (City of Tacoma, 2009). That same agreement designated a special fund be created as a line item in the city budget across each founding partner to administer Tacoma 360 (e.g, the City, Metro Parks Tacoma, and the Tacoma Public Schools) (City of Tacoma, 2009).

One TCSN stakeholder at a four-year institution viewed Tacoma 360 as the "predecessor" to Graduate Tacoma (GT.06), and another described Tacoma 360 as the "beginning of building coalition of community organizations and activists that were concerned or working in school" (GT.16). A TPS representative described Tacoma 360 as "different organizations that just had an organic conversation about coming together, focusing resources and effort to support underrepresented populations' access to college" (GT.26) or as a "collective group that it kind of started talking about how can we actually move the needle with Tacoma students" (GT.09). According to a Graduate Tacoma staffer, Tacoma 360 arose from "starting the conversation around really, 'How do we address our equity gaps and our dropout rates in Tacoma?'" (GT.25)

In 2010, another organization separate from Tacoma 360 called the Foundation for Tacoma Schools was also beginning to "monetarily support students" through "more of a traditional pass-through funding model" (GT.25). Though not yet named Foundation for Tacoma Students, the registered nonprofit name for Graduate Tacoma, an original IRS letter confirmed the tax-exempt status for the Foundation for Tacoma Schools under

section 501c3 of the Internal Revenue Code, effectively creating the nonprofit in 2010 (GuideStar, 2020; Internal Revenue Service, 2020). Foundation for Tacoma Schools gained more prominence for engaging local foundations and other funders to support Tacoma schools and was led by Eric Wilson who had worked on several local bond elections for the TPS and Metro Parks Tacoma previously (former Tacoma 360 representative, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

By the end of 2012, after a community goal-setting process conducted between the Foundation for Tacoma Schools and Tacoma 360 that year, the two organizations merged (Tacoma 360 representative, personal communication, March 19, 2021). Stakeholders familiar with how Tacoma 360 and the Foundation for Tacoma Schools eventually “joined forces” (GT.25) recognized distinctions among the two entities. Some stakeholders discussed the Foundation for Tacoma Schools as synonymous with Graduate Tacoma while others emphasized the work of Tacoma 360 without mentioning Foundation for Tacoma Schools. Still, in recognizing the differences between these groups, one current Graduate Tacoma employee summed up their perceived differences by describing how there were “two existing sort of enterprises” – one “more geared around equity” and “kind of a passionate grassroots community” [Tacoma 360] and the other “more technical” and “sort of an academic framework around how you could do a systems integration solution using modern methods and tools to improve school outcomes” [Foundation for Tacoma Schools] (GT.14).

Members of Tacoma 360 at the time (GT.06, GT.25) also noted the influence of community members learning about collective action and the StriveTogether model through different professional development opportunities. Julia Garnett, Tacoma 360’s

Executive Director, became a key player in sharing information about collective impact across Tacoma 360, the TCSN, and other educational organizations in Tacoma, including Foundation for Tacoma Schools. Joining Tacoma 360 and Foundation for Tacoma Schools together ostensibly was mutually beneficial to each organization. Associating the Foundation for Tacoma Schools with Graduate Tacoma, a City of Tacoma leader recounted how the merging of both entities was fiscally efficient:

There was an understanding that Tacoma 360 owned all that information about the not for profits and everything else that we talked about. And how to spread them among the city. And then there was also Graduate Tacoma and, at some point, it seemed to make sense because they were two separately funded kind of not-for-profit organizations. To put them together, because it was more efficient. (GT.20)

A leader in Tacoma 360 also confirmed that “with more money and stature,” the Foundation for Tacoma Schools was more equipped to become the backbone organization for Tacoma’s collective impact project (Tacoma 360 representative, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

In 2013, the Foundation for Tacoma Schools changed its name to the Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS), as reflected on the registered Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service (Internal Revenue Service, 2019), to reduce confusion for being associated with Tacoma Public Schools. With Eric Wilson as the first CEO and Julia Garnett as the first Director of Collective Action, the FFTS became a collaborative coordinating body, or “backbone” agency. The moniker, Graduate Tacoma, became the public-facing name for activities managed by backbone staff of FFTS (FFTS and Graduate Tacoma are used synonymously throughout for this reason). A January 2014 local newspaper article headline read, “Educational foundation sets sights on ambitious graduation goals” (Cafazzo, 2014) and noted that “the foundation, created in 2010 with

fundraising as its primary focus, has expanded its mission.” That mission, outlined in Graduate Tacoma’s first report to the Tacoma community was “increasing Tacoma’s 2010 graduation rate by 50 percent [to 87%] by the year 2020” (Cafazzo, 2014).

As the merging and “rebrand[ing]” of Graduate Tacoma unfolded in 2012 and early 2013, the TCSN’s momentum from its concurrent work on College Bound Scholarship sign-ups also provided an opportunity for the newly formed Graduate Tacoma movement. Stakeholders recalled how Graduate Tacoma wanted to create a Collaborative Action Network (CAN) around college access and success. A nonprofit leader and early TCSN member stated:

In the course of that time, Graduate Tacoma had rebranded. They wanted to identify a CAN for college success, access and success. That's when we got formally designated as part of the Graduate Tacoma framework. (GT.03)

Another former Tacoma 360 member and TCSN leader attributed this transition for the TCSN to the ideas of collective impact and collective action circulating among stakeholders, suggesting those conversations influenced thinking among Graduate Tacoma leaders to absorb the work of the TCSN:

As Tacoma 360 was having these community conversations about what does Tacoma want to accomplish through collective action, I remember United Way hosted a workshop about what is collective action...and several different sectors were brought to the table to talk about where collective impact could be useful for these really challenging social problems. Then, the Foundation for Tacoma Students landed on these different networks and asked TCSN to be the postsecondary network for that organization. (GT.06)

While the goal-setting process to form Graduate Tacoma involved TCSN partners throughout 2012, a community leader also discussed some “hesitancy to fold their work completely into Graduate Tacoma” given the promising work already being done around College Bound Scholarship sign-ups (former Tacoma 360 representative, personal

communication, March 19, 2021). After about a year of discussions and given that Graduate Tacoma “was able to contribute resources” including staffing, data analysis, and other capacities, the TCSN became more fully integrated into the work of Graduate Tacoma (former Tacoma 360 representative, personal communication, March 19, 2021). By 2014, becoming “like part of that umbrella” (GT.09), the TCSN became Graduate Tacoma’s first and oldest CAN.

### **Governance and Structure of Graduate Tacoma**

As of November 2020, the Foundation for Tacoma Students leading Graduate Tacoma is overseen by a 21-person nonprofit board and relies on a 16-person staff. Guided by StriveTogether’s collective impact model, backbone agencies like the Foundation for Tacoma Students that coordinate goals and activities across multiple organizations, set up Collaborative Action Networks, or CANs, to organize their collective work (StriveTogether, 2017). During data collection between 2018 and 2019, Graduate Tacoma divided their work into four CANs: 1) the Early Learning and Reading Network, 2) the Out-of-School and Summer Learning Network, 3) the STEAM Learning Network, and 4) the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN) (see Figure 12). In 2019, a fifth CAN, the Advocacy Network was created, building off work happening in Fall 2018 to identify a cradle-to-career policy advocacy agenda for students.

Among staff employed by Graduate Tacoma are Network Managers for each CAN (Graduate Tacoma, 2020e). All CANs have a leadership committee made up of volunteer representatives from community partner organizations who provide strategic planning and gather evaluative feedback to set goals and implement activities through the CAN. Network Managers are the main point of contact for their CAN’s member

organizations and leadership committee, helping to communicate information across the network, plan and organize meeting agendas and follow-up activities, and support the implementation of activities developed by the CAN.

**Figure 12**

*The Collaborative Action Networks (CANs) of Graduate Tacoma*

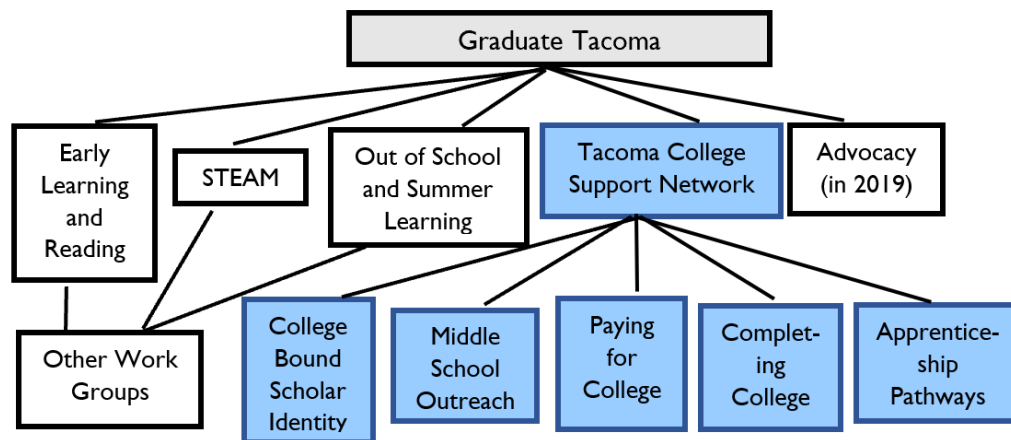


*Source.* Original image from Graduate Tacoma (2019b), p. 31

Within each CAN, work is divided among volunteers from different member organizations into work group committees which are led by “work group leads.” Figure 13 displays the five work groups associated with the TCSN within the overall organizational structure of Graduate Tacoma.

**Figure 13**

*Graduate Tacoma Collaborative Action Network and Workgroup Structure*



Stakeholders express the iterative and malleable process by which CANs organize and evolve. The CAN structure is designed to change as community needs change. One current Graduate Tacoma staff member discussed how the CANs are meant to be “malleable to community needs:”

It's so funny because it's, we're so like adaptive and malleable to community needs. It's like, I don't, it's hard to say, but I think also that's an advantage because the problems are adaptive and malleable. And so, then the way we look now is it very different we looked a year ago. And the way that culture of action networks function is very different than the way they functioned five years ago. And so, this is a really iterative, continuous cycle of improvement process. (GT.04)

The decentralized structure of the CANs means that they do not all function in the same way, but all have similar access to the backbone support of FFTS. For example, the CANs may apply for funds to conduct projects, but the process of acquiring those funds from Graduate Tacoma may look different from CAN to CAN. A current Graduate Tacoma employee explained how the process unfolds in the Out of School and Summer Learning CAN:



It's slightly different depending on the organizational structure and the network and what they do and so on. I'll say for example, like the Summer Learning Network, the bulk of their budget goes to incubate other programs. And so, I have an online, we have an online application process for that. And then the Network decides who gets what or what proportion. (GT.04)

Joining a CAN is a formal process where new partners attend an information meeting introducing them to the tenets of collective action and the different CANs.

Graduate Tacoma encourages interested stakeholders to attend CAN meetings of their choosing to experience the work for themselves. A Graduate Tacoma staff member emphasized that the orientation process to the CANs is meant to create buy-in for collective action:

So, we have like a formal onboarding process. It's like a meeting we show you the research on collective action, overwhelmingly it's effective. And then we talk a little bit about the nuts and bolts abstractly of our different collective action networks. And then we encourage people to come to meetings because if they're not, if their voice isn't there and they're not there or they're not participating even via email [...] I realize that sometimes the convenience aren't, don't sync with everyone's schedule. But it's very much an act to be effective we need these organizations to attend, to participate. And then I think from the organizations that did participate, they do see a big value add to their institutions. And then also see outcomes that they are excited about and that's why they keep coming back. And so the onboarding process is a little bit abstract, but really we want people to experience this sort of collective action, inaction and then they'd be more into what we're doing. (GT.04)

Meetings are also listed on Graduate Tacoma's website, presumably for any interested stakeholder to find and join meetings relevant to their agency. Another Graduate Tacoma staff member indicated that other staff sit in on the various CANs so that "there's always four or five ways for the information to flow" (GT.14).

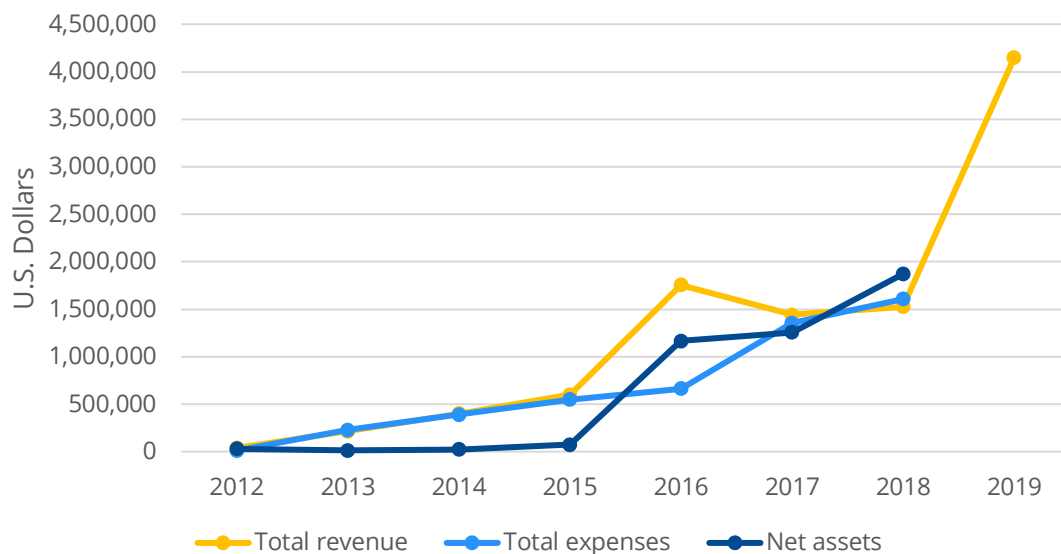
## **Funding**

Figure 14 displays total revenue, total expenses, and net assets for Graduate Tacoma based on earliest data available. By the end of FY2019, total revenues were

approximately \$4.15 million, an almost two-fold increase from FY2018 (ProPublica, 2020). The organization overall appears to be in good financial health, with total expenses generally the same or lower than total revenues for each year available except in 2018, and net assets increasing year-to-year between 2012 to 2018.

**Figure 14**

*Graduate Tacoma Total Revenue, Expenses, & Net Assets, 2012-2019*



*Notes.* Forms will be found by using the formal organization name, Foundation for Tacoma Students. Fiscal years ending in December are listed. All information except 2019 total revenue is extracted directly from the organization's Form 990s. While the entire 2019 Form 990 was not yet available, ProPublica lists the most recent annual revenue in 2019 for exempt organizations when available on their search engine.

*Source.* Internal Revenue Service (2019)

## Revenue Sources

Graduate Tacoma fiscally supports itself primarily through grants from philanthropic foundations and financial support in the General Fund of the City of Tacoma. These investments along with various smaller grants over time from different family foundations have contributed to Graduate Tacoma's overall fiscal health and ability to sustain its work at present.

Revenue from the City of Tacoma is not specified in the interlocal agreement set up in 2009 that established one of the precursor organization, Tacoma 360. The City of Tacoma senior leader described being a committed funder of Graduate Tacoma, explaining:

So there's not money they have to compete for, we are just a pure funder of Graduate Tacoma. I think there have been times they've gone after additional money through some of our human services opportunities. But it's something that I am definitely committed to and will continue to make sure that it is funded. (GT.24)

Start-up capital as early as 2011 and 2012 also came from local Tacoma family foundations (Foundation Directory Online, 2020). Revenue from larger, national foundations now makes up a greater portion of Graduate Tacoma's revenue base. Explained by a Graduate Tacoma staff member, as Graduate Tacoma has received more recognition for its work, it has been able to attract national funders alongside local support from foundations:

I know that when we first started off, we were very predominantly funded by local funders, local foundations. We received money, for example, from the Cheney Foundation, the Russell Family Foundation, the Boeing Foundation, so a lot of the ... the Milgard Foundation. I'm listing a lot of what are local funders here in Tacoma, and that was the majority. And obviously we had a much more lean staff. There was only three or four of us. And we were making a go of it that way. As we have developed in our strategies and our outcomes, and really gotten more national recognition, we've attracted and we have a majority of funding is now coming in from mostly large national foundations, alongside local foundations. (GT.25)

Being a StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network member has helped Graduate Tacoma garner new sources of revenue. A current Graduate Tacoma staffer recognized the special "proof point" status for Graduate Tacoma:

We also are a proof point organization, a proof point community for the Strive Foundation, and with Strive, which is based out of Cincinnati, we have a lot of training and models and we are one of those model collective action communities.

They are, actually, their whole mission is to fund and to nurture collective action across the United States, and we're one of those communities. (GT.25)

One consequential source of revenue for Graduate Tacoma came from StriveTogether's Cradle to Career Community Challenge grant, which originated in 2017 from a \$60 million gift made by the Ballmer Group, the philanthropic arm of Steve Ballmer, former CEO of Microsoft, and Connie Ballmer, his wife and a board member of StriveTogether. The gift was to support StriveTogether's "efforts to reduce racial and socioeconomic disparities nationwide" across its members and was primarily used to start a Community Challenge fund "designed to accelerate the network's efforts and strengthen the organization's efforts to disseminate learning to other organizations in the youth development field" (Philanthropy News Digest, 2017).

StriveTogether developed a two-pronged Cradle to Career Community Challenge fund program, awarding over \$20 million between 2018-2021 to "strengthen and align the many systems, such as education, employment, health and housing, that shape opportunity for children and families in America" (StriveTogether, 2018c). The first type of fund was a Strategic Initiatives Fund focused on supporting policy and advocacy coordination efforts within state and local coalitions, with grants of up to \$350,000 a year, renewable for three years. The second was an Opportunity Fund with grants of up to \$500,000 per year for three years. This Fund was meant to scale projects in the network to further systems change through aligning education with health, housing, and transportation sectors.

Graduate Tacoma received both grants in 2018 (StriveTogether, 2018), reflected by the sharp growth in total revenues by FY2019. According to StriveTogether's 2018 Form 990, FFTS/Graduate Tacoma received \$425,000 through the Challenge fund that

year. With the Strategic Initiatives Fund, Graduate Tacoma launched a new political advocacy CAN, the Graduate Tacoma Advocacy Network, to help impact local, regional, and state policies shaping educational outcomes for Tacoma and Pierce County students. The Opportunity Fund grant was meant to “address upward mobility by extending existing collaborative impact work into adjacent systems focusing specifically on equity” (Strive Together, 2018c) and, in turn, helped create a new initiative, Tacoma Completes, discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

In June 2019, Graduate Tacoma was also awarded a one-time \$2.5 million grant by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The grant was aimed to expand Graduate Tacoma’s work by setting up a Community Learning Fund (Graduate Tacoma, 2020a), the largest one-time gift for Graduate Tacoma in its history (Foundation Directory Online, 2020). The goal of the Fund is to directly “deepen the capacity and capability of the Graduate Tacoma community-wide movement” (Graduate Tacoma, 2020a). In Graduate Tacoma’s “Framework for Systems Change” developed for the Community Learning Fund, the investment will be distributed across three focal areas: community partner capacity and capability, data capacity and capability, and postsecondary access and completion to ultimately “close racial and economic disparities for Tacoma’s future generations” (Graduate Tacoma, 2020a).

### **General Expenses**

Foundation for Tacoma Students was not established as a “pass-through” granting agency like typical foundations, where a primary role would be to spend financial resources by distributing grants to other organizations. However, as the main role of the Graduate Tacoma movement is to build the capacity and supports of the local community

around the goals of collaborating partners, Graduate Tacoma sometimes will provide financial resources to collaborative projects in its Collaborative Action Networks and support other community initiatives. Reiterated by a Graduate Tacoma staff member involved in fund development, the goal for how Graduate Tacoma spends its financial resources is not to be a specific grantor to individual organizations:

And so like we don't do a lot of pass-through funding, even though... And that's, people miss... you know, we've got a foundation in our name, but we don't do a lot of that. And most backbone organizations don't do that at all or very little of it. (GT.14)

This same staffer explained that as a backbone organization, they do not wish to compete for funding with the organizations in the collaboration or dictate how organizations should use their own funding:

So then, detouring back into what it's like to participate in a collective impact community such as ours. We don't get into how our partners organize and fund themselves nor is it our role to provide them funding to do their work. (GT.14)

Instead, according to Graduate Tacoma's development staff, the organization perceives their role to be connecting funders to the collective work of partner organizations in order to maximize impact:

Really, the role is around describing opportunities that emerge as a result of partners being able to understand each other more clearly so that a local foundation who's interested in funding college access can realize, "Well, we've got four people doing SAT preparedness here. How can we be more efficient with this?" And, "Can you three work together more closely?" And, "Can you, the fourth one, actually stop doing it and instead do this other thing that's really more in your wheelhouse?" And this local foundation that was giving, you know, 10 or 20 grand to each of them, says, "Look, I'll give you 150, but I want you to work together this way." Or, "I want you to tell me how you can better work together, but I know that there's duplicative funding going on here and duplicative expenses." (GT.14)

General expenses to operate the backbone organization, according to a fund development staff member "is easy" to raise as the organization does not need a large

staff to operate at scale (GT.14). Estimating that “you’re in pretty good shape” once you have six to eight people on board, the staff member acknowledged that the core investment for Graduate Tacoma is in the right kinds of people, specifically those who can develop shared measurement and data systems, who are “expensive people to hire and keep on staff,” CAN managers who bring collaborative skillsets, and executive-level leadership who can build public will in the community (GT.14).

Expenses have grown over time in part to financially support Graduate Tacoma’s growing staff. In 2013, Graduate Tacoma employed four employees. By 2018, the organization employed 19 staff for its operations (IRS, 2013, 2018). At least \$318,471 was spent on the salaries of Graduate Tacoma’s two senior executive leaders in 2018 (21% of total revenue) compared to \$87,500 for one executive in 2013 (41% of total revenue) (IRS, 2013, 2018).

Graduate Tacoma also supports a Teacher Impact Award program, which provides small grants up to \$2,000 to Tacoma teachers to support their classroom projects (Graduate Tacoma, 2018b). According to a November 2018 Graduate Tacoma website post, between 2015 to 2018, the organization allocated approximately \$85,000 on the Teacher Impact Awards (Graduate Tacoma, 2018b). Another staff member in Graduate Tacoma described this dynamic for the organization:

In the past, our job was not ... we weren't ... we were providing backbone support but not funding support. We have done some small granting. We've done some Summer Learning Access funding. We've done some teacher access grants for teachers who want to apply for a very small amount of money to help, maybe, build a project in their classroom, or something that helps map some of our indicators. But we have not been an organization that was funding other organizations. (GT.25)

The \$2.5 million gift from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is reshaping how Graduate Tacoma distributes funds across different organizational partners. As explained by a Graduate Tacoma staff member, the discussions for how funds will be distributed among different partner organizations in ways that minimize rather than augment competition are evolving:

But now, because of this large grant with Gates, which has a two-year time frame, we are becoming more of a funding catalyst. One of the features of that grant is building capability and capacity for our partners. We're actually looking at where partners are, how they scale up the work that they're really doing that are matching and meeting our indicators. So, we're in the process right now of very quickly developing those, a whole panel that's going to be an advisory board for that, and a rubric, and application process. But this is all very new to us and under a quick time frame. (GT.25)

## **Summary**

The chapter provides context about Tacoma and its educational landscape that eventually led to the formation of Foundation for Tacoma Students and the Graduate Tacoma movement. With more detail into the present-day operations of Graduate Tacoma, this case description addresses some of the general antecedents and initial conditions spurring how the TCSN has evolved and changed through dynamic collaboration processes. Laid out in more depth in the next chapter, the workings of the TCSN are emblematic of how collaborating stakeholders operationalize a community-wide vision to improve educational outcomes.



## **CHAPTER 6: THE TACOMA COLLEGE SUPPORT NETWORK'S ROLE IN SHAPING POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES**

This chapter focuses on the embedded analysis of the Tacoma College Support Network (TCSN), Graduate Tacoma's first Collaborative Action Network (CAN) which currently coordinates the bulk of postsecondary-related activities in Graduate Tacoma. The chapter outlines the current partners involved in the TCSN, how this CAN is structured, and delves into the primary postsecondary-related strategies and how those strategies developed within the TCSN (RQ1). The next section considers the status of targeted educational outcomes for the TCSN and how the postsecondary-related strategies connect to these outcomes (RQ2). In discussing the forces that influence relationships to between the TCSN's strategies and outcomes, the chapter also describes how organizational stakeholders perceived the advancement of educational equity in collaborating to improve postsecondary-related outcomes in the Tacoma community (RQ3).

### **TCSN's Organizational Structure**

The TCSN's structure shapes the strategies that are employed across collaborating organizations. Like other CANs in Graduate Tacoma, the TCSN has a Network Manager employed by Graduate Tacoma who helps coordinate, organize, and plan initiatives developed within the CAN by its organizational members. A leadership committee made up of different representatives from member organizations shape the priorities in the CAN and helps divide activities among different work groups. Leadership committee membership is mostly voluntarily and changing, but there is intentionality from Graduate Tacoma staff to ensure core partners from the TPS, postsecondary institutions, and

among nonprofits are represented (GT.25, personal communication, February 27, 2021). There has also been a more recent push to include young professionals on the leadership team (GT.01, personal communication, March 7, 2021). During the 2018-19 school year, the seven member TCSN leadership committee included representatives of TPS, University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), Tacoma Community College (TCC), and local nonprofits, including the College Success Foundation and Degrees of Change. A UWT and TPS representative on the leadership committee shared responsibilities in co-facilitating monthly TCSN meetings.

As mentioned, there were five work groups in the TCSN in the 2018-19 school year: 1) Middle School Outreach, 2) College Bound Scholar Identity, 3) Paying for College, 4) Completing College (also referred to as College Persistence and Completion), and the newest work group, 5) Apprenticeship Pathways. Indicative of the TCSN's historical roots supporting College Bound Scholarship sign-ups, Middle School Outreach and College Bound Scholar Identity focus on college readiness and awareness activities in middle school, particularly related to the College Bound Scholarship. The other work groups represent the broadening of TCSN's work as postsecondary access and success CAN for Graduate Tacoma.

Table 4 highlights that organizations on TCSN's leadership committee also take a lead role in organizing specific work groups. While other organizational partners take part in TCSN activities, the staff of these lead organizations play an influential role in determining and implementing strategies in the TCSN. Other partners act in supporting capacities to execute the strategies tied to different goals within the work group.

**Table 4***2018-19 TCSN Work Group Leaders and Partners*

<b>Work Group Name</b>	<b>Lead Organization(s)</b>	<b>Other TCSN Partners</b>
Middle School Outreach - College Bound Sign-Up Campaign	College Success Foundation (CSF), Tacoma Public Schools (TPS)	CSF AmeriCorps Staff, TPS Counselors
College Bound Identity	University of Washington-Tacoma (UWT)	TPS, Tacoma Community College (TCC)
Paying for College	Degrees of Change	Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), Washington College Access Network (WCAN), Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD), TPS
Completing College	Degrees of Change	UWT, TCC, Bates Technical College, University of Puget Sound
Apprenticeship Pathways	Peace Community Center, Bates Technical College	

*Notes.* This table was created by consolidating information across four documents detailing organization of TCSN's work groups as they evolved in the 2018-19 school year.

*Source.* Documents shared by Graduate Tacoma in January 2019 with author

There are other activities that the TCSN supports, but that TCSN members do not directly plan in their work groups. Instead, as shown in Table 5, these activities tend to be led by the TCSN Network Manager or by other partners (e.g., VANI Completion Campaign within TPS). Some projects (e.g., Discover U) also occur across Graduate Tacoma CANs that have shared messaging or advertising among collaborating organizations to support.

**Table 5***2018-19 Lead Organizations for Other Strategies Supported by TCSN*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Lead Organizations</b>
FAFSA/WASFA Mailers	Graduate Tacoma TCSN Network Manager
VANI Completion Campaign	Tacoma Public Schools (TPS)
Washington State Opportunity Scholarship Sign-Ups (WSOS)	TPS, Graduate Tacoma STEAM Collaborative Action Network (CAN)
College & Career Toolkits	Graduate Tacoma TCSN Network Manager, TPS
Discover U	TPS, Graduate Tacoma (cross-CAN)
College Depot	TPS, Tacoma Public Libraries, Graduate Tacoma (cross-CAN), Tacoma Community College (TCC)

*Notes.* This table was created by consolidating information across four documents detailing organization of strategies supported but not led by the TCSN in the 2018-19 school year.

*Source.* Documents shared by Graduate Tacoma in January 2019 with author

TPS as a district plays a larger role in leading several of these strategies that the TCSN then promotes across their organizations. Postsecondary institutions are less represented in these supporting activities, and instead, play a more active role within TCSN's work groups.

### **TCSN's Postsecondary-Related Strategies (RQ1)**

The strategies promoted by the TCSN create the structure for organizational members and other stakeholders to engage with one another and mutually support and benefit each other. Action Plans for the school year are usually devised in the summer among work groups with oversight from the TCSN Leadership Committee. Work groups also identify specific needs of Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN Leadership Committee to execute their Action Plans. For example, in one planning document, work groups discussed the need for communications and promotional material support, managing

event volunteers, and “clarification on funding, budget” as key activities for which they needed support from Graduate Tacoma.

To understand the variety of strategies under the purview of the TCSN, Table 6 summarizes the goals and strategies within the Action Plans for each of the TCSN’s five work groups in the 2018-19 school year.

**Table 6**

*2018-19 TCSN Action Plan Goals and Strategies for Achieving Goals*

<b>Work Group Name</b>	<b>Goal(s)</b>	<b>Strategies</b>
Middle School Outreach - College Bound Sign-Up Campaign	"100% of all College Bound Scholarship-eligible students signed up as a CBS scholar by the by 8 <sup>th</sup> grade"	"The network will support by providing new strategies and incentives for sign-ups and support outreach events, such as College 101 nights at middle schools for students and families" - with added supports at one targeted middle school and "sharing of best practices between schools" "Design a Middle School College Bound Scholar Identity event - either at [targeted middle school] or as part of College Bound Saturday in April 2019"
College Bound Identity	"Provide supports for College Bound students & families to understand, maintain, access CBS scholarship and postsecondary pathways"	"Listening Tour - Meet with HS counseling and college support staff to find out what we can do to best support and align with strategies supporting CBS Scholars"
	"Review and revise College Bound Saturday to be a year-round series of touch points with College Bound Scholars, leveraging and partnering with CBO and TPS offerings"	"College Bound Series - build out a year-round calendar of CBS support event, which outreaches and engages with students and families"
Paying for College	Increase # of FRL eligible TPS students completing FAFSA/WASFA forms by 20 percentage points (67% to 87%)	Supplying mini grants for FAFSA/WASFA completion nights at high schools and community centers

		Publication materials & marketing - fliers for webinar, mini grants, design work
		Aligning with WSAC 12th Year Campaign - identifying a champion at each high school
		Promote new FAFSA app and develop text nudge communications plan
Completing College	"Increase by 50% the number of TPS students successfully enrolling in and completing 2-or 4-year college degree or technical certificate from 35% (College Completion) to 52% by 2020"	"The network will host the second 'What's Next' event in May 2019, including two additional colleges, Bates & University of Puget Sound", and Pacific Lutheran University
		"Expand the 'What's Next' platform, and roll out the 'In College' communication platform (intentional strategies for produc[ing] 'community-lean in')"
Apprenticeship Pathways	"Exploring career connected pathways/partnerships"	Research and awareness of apprenticeship programs and pathways
		Plan information workshops for TPS Career Centers
		"Align with other work groups to include more Apprenticeship information at upcoming TCSN events- including a Middle School College and Career Nights, TPS College Fair (Fall)."

*Notes.* This table was created by consolidating information across four documents detailing goals and strategies for TCSN's work groups as they evolved in the 2018-19 school year. Direct quotes were used where possible to capture the core strategies among the TCSN work groups in their essence. When information was new or was repeated at different levels of depth across documents, I chose to summarize and combine information by providing the most detail about the goal or strategy whenever possible.

*Source.* Documents shared by Graduate Tacoma in January 2019 with author

The core work of the TCSN is largely event driven. All work groups except for Apprenticeship Pathways include one-time or reoccurring events throughout the school year.

Table 7 displays the goals and strategies for projects that are not led directly by

the TCSN.

**Table 7**

*Supporting Strategies Not Led By TCSN*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Details</b>
FAFSA/WASFA Mailers	Support FAFSA/WAFSA Completion	"Design, print, mailing to 2,000 seniors
VANI Completion Campaign	"Goal is to have 100% of graduating TPS seniors complete the Verification of Acceptance at Next Institution (VANI) form	"The network will support TPS efforts as needed. Current data will be presented on at each network meeting"
Washington State Opportunity Scholarship (WSOS)	"...the goal to have 260+ applications submitted [to the WSOS Scholarship]"	"[TCSN] will support the STEAM CAN's efforts to raise awareness of the scholarship and promote application completion through workshops and outreach."
College & Career Toolkits	Distribute toolkits to approximately 14,000 students, grades 6-12; "Communication/outreach to 10,000+ students and families to share resources, partner contacts, events, action steps for college and career"	Toolkits contain "grade appropriate action steps, checklists, tips, and information for college and career planning"
Discover U	"Support cross-CAN K-16 work to build college and career going culture"; "a special week for every TPS student to explore college and career opportunities he or she may be interested in pursuing. Each classroom is encouraged to participate with robust college and career exploration lessons, field trips, and activities to boost college and career awareness across the TPS district"	"Design, print flyers, registration, event supports, incentives, stipends"
College Depot	"Support ongoing CBS Identity outreach and goal of 50% increase in college enrollment by 2020"; " ...a series of free college access workshops for TPS students during the summer, including presentations by TCSN partners on financial aid, scholarships, college fit, and writing the personal statement, and individual support from a team of local college students."	"Workshop costs, presenter stipends, materials, food, College Navigator stipends"

*Notes.* This table was created by consolidating information across four documents detailing goals and strategies for TCSN's work groups as they evolved in the 2018-19 school year. Direct quotes were used where possible to capture the core strategies among the TCSN work groups in their essence. When information was new or was repeated at different levels of depth across documents, I chose to summarize and combine information by providing the most detail about the goal, strategy, or budget line whenever possible.

*Source.* Documents shared by Graduate Tacoma in January 2019 with author

While strategies within TCSN's work groups focus on running particular programs and

events, the strategies in Table 7 show “support” by creating communication materials (e.g, brochures, fliers) for partner events and cross-promoting activities happening in other CANs.

Three strategies were mentioned most consistently in TCSN stakeholder interviews as showcasing how organizations collaborate: executing College Bound Saturday, designing the What’s Next: Design Your Future community event (What’s Next), and creating College and Career Toolkits. To a lesser extent, TCSN members spoke about efforts to increase financial aid applications across the city and a new initiative called Tacoma Completes. Elaborated upon in the following sections, the strategies promoted through the TCSN are the vehicles in which to enact collaboration – they provide clear and bounded ways in which organizations find inroads to work together and that build trust and mutual benefits to advance shared goals.

### **College Bound Saturday**

The annual College Bound Saturday event, an event that was changed in the 2018-19 school year to spread across multiple days throughout the year, demonstrated one way that the TCSN worked together. As described by the TCSN Network Manager, College Bound Saturday helped bring “all of those partners to the table” in ways that were “not happening” before. (GT.25)

The earliest iterations of College Bound Saturday began in approximately 2008 as an event “focused on supporting students already signed up and their parents to assure the students will be eligible for the scholarship upon graduation” (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014, p.10). Named College Bound Saturday by 2012, the event connected current College Bound high school students to college preparatory resources. Led by the



College Bound Identity work group of the TCSN, college and career counselors within TPS and other organizational members recruited and invited students in 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade and their families to this one-day event to “get all kinds of useful information about [the state’s] College Bound Scholarship, the college admissions process, how to make paying for college easier, and so much more” (Graduate Tacoma, 2017). According to an advertisement from Graduate Tacoma to encourage volunteers for April 2018’s College Bound Saturday (held from 10am to 1pm at Mount Tahoma High School), the event was expected to draw more than 800 people that year, representing about 9.4% of the total 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade TPS population (Graduate Tacoma, 2018d; Graduate Tacoma, 2020b). Describing the purpose of College Bound Saturday, a TCSN stakeholder stated that this is a “collaborative effort”:

One was an event called College Bound Sunday, or Saturday, which was an event designated to those kids who'd signed up in seventh or eighth grade that was designed to help them come to an event, get inspired around college, and make sure that they actually put this scholarship they have access to work. That was a really broad. The school district, a whole bunch of partners pulling off this event. They just recently, this year decided to go a different direction and break one big event into smaller events in schools, but that was a collaborative effort. (GT.03)

The College Bound Saturday event also created a platform for finding synergies across work groups in the TCSN, especially as the work group decided to change a single-day event to instead take place over multiple days throughout the year. A Paying for College work group member discussed working with the College Bound Identity work group to support shared goals:

I'm part of Paying for College, that committee, and we have been thinking about like how can we loop then our peers from the College Bound Saturday committee to our Paying for College so that we can have that information at our Paying for College events. So, we're trying to leverage the district data day, which is essentially a day where students are not in school, the teachers are. (GT.17)

As referred to by this stakeholder, one of the Paying for College work group strategies is to coordinate a citywide FAFSA/WASFA completion event happening across multiple sites on the same day. The event relies on all TCSN members “chipping in” (GT.17) to provide staff, space, and consolidate information to communicate the availability of financial aid support. TCSN members plan the logistics for multiple sites, including supplying food, and providing drop-in FAFSA completion services, and counselors to help students understand financial aid award letters on the same date. A Paying for College work group member specified their efforts to respond to the shifts in the College Bound strategy by describing:

So, throughout the city, we have ... next Saturday is April 22nd and so we are hosting an all-day drop-in, complete your FAFSA. We have some data that shows that 57% of our seniors still have not completed their FAFSA. And so, it's both the day for that to happen and also for those students to have financial aid award letters for us to talk through what their financial aid award letter really means and to consider certain options. All these sites that are hosting people, we'll have some food, we will have some experts on call to answer any questions. We want to loop in College Bound to talk about that component. However, our little hiccup is that College Bound Saturday was designed around one day on site and we are designed one-day multiple sites. So, we're trying to see how we can still represent College Bound at our multiple sites and represent them well.

This partner further described that they could see a potential “two-committee partnership” (GT.17) between the Paying for College and College Bound Identity work groups later forming to further coordinate ways to bolster services available during traditional College Bound Saturday activities.

### **What’s Next: Design Your Future**

When describing collaboration within the TCSN, stakeholders most often described the iterations and execution of the What’s Next: Design Your Future event. As

an event created by and driven by TCSN partners, the event represented, in the words of one stakeholder, “very much a collaborative collective impact kind of deal” (GT.01)

Launched as a pilot in Spring 2018 by the Completing College work group of the TCSN, What’s Next takes place in late May after students have made their postsecondary decisions. The event is delivered through a partnership between Tacoma’s postsecondary institutions, Tacoma public high schools, and nonprofit organizational partners. The original pilot program included UWT and TCC as postsecondary partners. In its second iteration in Spring 2019, TCSN organizers expanded to include University of Puget Sound, Pacific Lutheran University, and Bates Technical College as additional postsecondary partners.

As first planned in 2018, the What’s Next event was structured by TCSN organizers to reduce summer melt and promote belonging. During the event, students congregated at a local community center and heard from a panel of students attending those institutions. The colleges then hosted breakout sessions for the students enrolling in their institutions. As one postsecondary partner described:

But what they do is they gather all of the students from Tacoma who committed to go to TCC last year, and UWT, brought them together, had the mayor there. This is part of this community support, encouragement, whatever. Had the mayor there, community representatives going, "Way to go! We're proud of you. We're going to help you as you take your next steps," kind of a thing. (GT.02)

What’s Next also built on the approaches of Degrees of Change, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering college completion and community leadership that spearheaded planning for the event. As a lead organizer described, the event was meant to help “identify a cohort of students” (GT.03) and begin getting “permission to message them, to keep through their college years to stay in touch with them.” The event was also staged “very carefully”

(GT.03) as a research-based mindset intervention where "... college students that were on stage told their story, but they knew the points that we were trying to get across, which was 'This is hard and it's worth it, and here's my story about how I can prove that.'"

(GT.03)

Stakeholders also characterized the initiative as symbolic of the types of community support that TCSN is trying to foster around an infrastructure for collaboration. As iterated by TCSN leadership, the goal of the event is "trying to bring [students] together and then collectively as a community say, "You're about to graduate. Congratulations, but we're not done with you. We're going to still be here cheering and supporting you." (GT.03)

As articulated by a TCSN leader, the process of planning the event also generates the "organizing platform" in which different organizations can see how to engage:

I think in that, and again, it's not a huge event. I mean, it's a single event, but we're looking at it from the perspective is that we're trying to build what I would describe like a platform. Here's an organizing platform that the community and higher ed partners can organize students as they leave high school because from K through 12, the organizing principle is the school district. You know where to find kids. They're in school. There's a single entity that you can work through. (GT.03)

Another active TCSN stakeholder discussed how the What's Next event facilitated ways for postsecondary institutions, in particular, to play an active role in the collaboration:

Now they have those versions in other schools of people and a lot of them are on the TCSN table, but we don't have as much reason to be as connected with them. This coming year TCSN is hosting What's Next 2019 and we're adding three new institutions, purely because they're at the table. (GT.01)

Enthusiasm from one of the local postsecondary university partners joining the What's Next event for 2019 was also apparent, supporting how this event developed within the TCSN provided an entry point for other universities to deepen their collaboration:

And then we're working with TCSN. The Foundation is also involved in evolving that. The TCSN is just a piece of starting this picture, to bring those cohorts together before school even starts in the fall. But also have them be seen as a collective cohort of Tacoma students, that we are bringing all these local supports. They piloted it last year and they asked UPS, Bates Technical, 'You guys interested?' 'Yeah! We're interested.' I came back, communicated, actually had a meeting with their leadership and our new dean of students, our office of communications, and other folks. Met with them to learn about, 'Okay, what's next? What did they do last year?' (GT.02)

### **College and Career Toolkits**

Supported but not led by TCSN members is the development of Career and College Toolkits. This collaborative activity started circa 2014 when the TCSN became part of Graduate Tacoma and was one important activity to help TCSN integrate into the work of Graduate Tacoma (former Tacoma 360 representative, personal communication, March 19, 2021). Each Toolkit consists of a booklet that includes action planning templates, tip sheets, checklists, general college-going advice, and contact information for Tacoma's college and career counselors at each school, professionally designed and customized for middle school grades (6-8) and for each high school grade (9-12). The Toolkits were built with considerable input from TCSN network members and Tacoma Public School (TPS) college and career counselors. The TCSN Network Manager described how they continue to proactively reach out to relevant TCSN stakeholders to keep the Toolkits updated, describing, for example, the process of having postsecondary partners review them:

And I send out the pages, the two-year application templates, I send it out to the community college partners, "Hey, take a look at this. Has any of the information changed? Should it be worded differently?" The apprenticeship section, "Hey, how can we get stronger language in here? Are there new websites? Are there new resources?" To the scholarship section, "What scholarships should be in here?" That couldn't happen without a network that collaboratively created those collaborative communication tools where families are then getting those. (GT.25)

A TCSN member working for a college access organization discussed how the development of the Toolkits met dual needs for helping train their staff and promoting collaborative goals. They described:

The toolkits were developed four or five years ago, and I was familiar with them. And [TCSN Network Manager] said, "Hey, can we ask your AmeriCorps to help put this package together?" And I said, 'Sure, we'll do that if you will explain to them as part of their professional development why we did these toolkits in the first place. What use they are. Then if you'll consider using them to make a toolkit that's more accessible to middle school.' So, it's a back and forth right? Our staff help inform things, our staff helps put things together and then uses it, the materials that are put together. So, the fact that they're involved in pieces of it is really important. (GT.16)

Suggesting buy-in for the Toolkits by the TPS, TPS staff alongside the TCSN co-designed the student and parent resource webpages integrating the Toolkit on a TPS landing page and website called plan4college.me (GT.25, personal communication, February 27, 2021). Toolkits for Middle School, Freshman, Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors were linked under "Checklists" that also provide other grade appropriate resources for attending college. On this site, TPS made note to "Make use of our College Toolkits and track your progress with these checklists," demonstrating ownership over the materials crafted in collaboration with Graduate Tacoma. In 2020, the TPS updated their website and due to district staff constraints in updating Toolkit content, the management and hosting of the Toolkits later transferred over to Graduate Tacoma's site (GT.25, personal communication, February 27, 2021; Graduate Tacoma, 2020e).

The Toolkits are also used by other nonprofit stakeholders, though to varying degrees. A program director for a local nonprofit indicated that while the Toolkits weren't fundamental to their work, they refer students to the Toolkits and resources put out by Graduate Tacoma to ensure students:

But at this point, I wouldn't say that we extensively use those resources, other than making sure that our students have them, providing them to our students, letting them know about, for example, when they put together that list of all the FAFSA nights. Letting our students know, "Hey, you've got a list from Graduate Tacoma of all these different FAFSA nights happening around the area. If you didn't get your FAFSA done with us, you can go to one of these nights and get some help, too." (GT.10)

Another college counselor working in several TPS schools with high school students discussed how they incorporated the financial aid Toolkit materials into their practice:

I think one of the specific things is the financial needs toolkit that was brought up during this school year that's really comprehensive about like the different things that you need to check off and make sure you do for your financial aid. So, I've been using that with my students, so they know what to bring when they're doing their FAFSA, things like that. That's been really helpful to me to have just like that one-sheeter to give out to students. It's like a lot of the resources that are helpful for me are the different publications or little check sheets that they provide that I just give students so that they know what they need. (GT.23)

### **Relationships between TCSN's Strategies and Intended Outcomes (RQ2)**

To understand the relationship between the strategies employed by the TCSN and improving educational outcomes, I draw primarily on secondary data sources and stakeholder perceptions about the relative contribution of the collaboration and the TCSN for different kinds of impacts observed. Graduate Tacoma tracks multiple kinds of data in their pursuit of improving community-level educational outcomes in Tacoma. These data include demographics, attendance, summer learning, preschool enrollment, kindergarten readiness, third grade reading, sixth grade achievement, eighth grade math, 9<sup>th</sup> grade achievement, "high expectations" – or participation in dual credit courses (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, College in the High School, and Running Start), high school graduation (four and five-year rates), college entrance exams, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b).

These data are published as interactive data dashboards on Graduate Tacoma's (2020b) website so that the public may see trends in educational outcomes. Each year, Graduate Tacoma also releases a Community Report detailing progress on these and other related metrics aligned to work in the CANs. Community Reports also include information from the TCSN about College Bound Scholarship sign-ups, Washington State Opportunity Scholarship's application submission rates, FAFSA completion, and Verified Acceptance at Next Institution (VANI) completion. Data on the interactive dashboard are updated annually by data specialists staffed in Graduate Tacoma and they utilize data from the school district, state (e.g., Washington OSPI, Washington State Education Research and Data Center [ERDC]), and national sources (e.g., National Student Clearinghouse). When possible, data are also broken out by subgroup, including by school, gender, poverty status, race/ethnicity, English Language Learner status, homeless status, 504 plan status (i.e., students with a dis/ability), and special education status.

Like other CANs, the TCSN maps their goals and strategies to these overarching community-level indicators. Table 8 summarizes the data indicators prioritized in the TCSN's Action Plans in 2018-19. The Action Plans are tied to both collaboration-wide indicators tracked by Graduate Tacoma and TCSN's prioritized outcome indicators, on-time high school graduation and postsecondary completion, referred to by the group in documents as their "north star" indicators. Outcome indicators tied to TCSN-led strategies and other strategies that TCSN supports act as benchmarks for TCSN's "north star" and collaboration-wide outcomes.



**Table 8***2018-19 Outcome Indicators Tied to TCSN Work Group Strategies*

Graduate Tacoma Indicators			
College entrance exams			
High school graduation			
Postsecondary enrollment			
Postsecondary completion			
TCSN "North Star" Indicators			
On-time high school graduation			
Postsecondary completion (certificate or degree)			
TCSN Work Groups' Identified Indicators			
Outcome Indicator	Data Sources	TCSN Work Group Direct Strategies	Supporting Strategies (not led by TCSN)
High school graduation rate			College & Career Toolkits; Discover U (Cross-CAN); College Depot
College Bound Scholarship sign-up rate	Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC)	Middle School Outreach Paying for College	
College Bound Scholarship 9th/10th Grade repledge activities	Washington College Access Network (WCAN)	College Bound Identity	
FAFSA/WASFA completion rate	Federal Student Aid & WSAC (FAFSA rates only)	College Bound Identity Paying for College	College Depot
Verified Acceptance at Next Institution (VANI) completion rate	Tacoma Public Schools	College Bound Identity	VANI Completion Campaign; Discover U; College Depot
Washington State Opportunity Scholarship (WSOS) applications and awards			WSOS Application Completion (led by Graduate Tacoma STEAM Network)

Postsecondary enrollment rate	National Student Clearinghouse; Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)	Completing College	College & Career Toolkits; Discover U (Cross-CAN); College Depot
Postsecondary completion rate	National Student Clearinghouse; Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)	Completing College	Discover U (Cross-CAN)

*Notes.* Data indicators did not include more specific information on data disaggregates available. This table reflects how TCSN members aligned their work groups to selected outcome indicators in their planning documents.

*Source.* TCSN Action Plans shared with author by Graduate Tacoma in 2019

Each following section details trends for TCSN Work Groups' identified indicators listed in Table 7. While TCSN work groups at the time of study did not specify work group goals tied to high school graduation rates, progress on this indicator is discussed because it is considered a "north star" indicator for the TCSN and due to the central importance that raising high school graduation rates is to the evolution of Graduate Tacoma. WSOS applications and award rate indicators are not discussed as the strategies to increase WSOS applications reside in Graduate Tacoma's STEAM CAN. While college entrance exams are tracked collaboration-wide for Graduate Tacoma, none of TCSN's strategies in 2018-19 explicitly tied their work to this outcome indicator and are also not discussed. Tracking what data suggest about these indicators and how stakeholders made sense of the contribution of their collaborative work to those trends helps illuminate potential connections between cross-sector collaboration strategies and community-level educational outcomes.

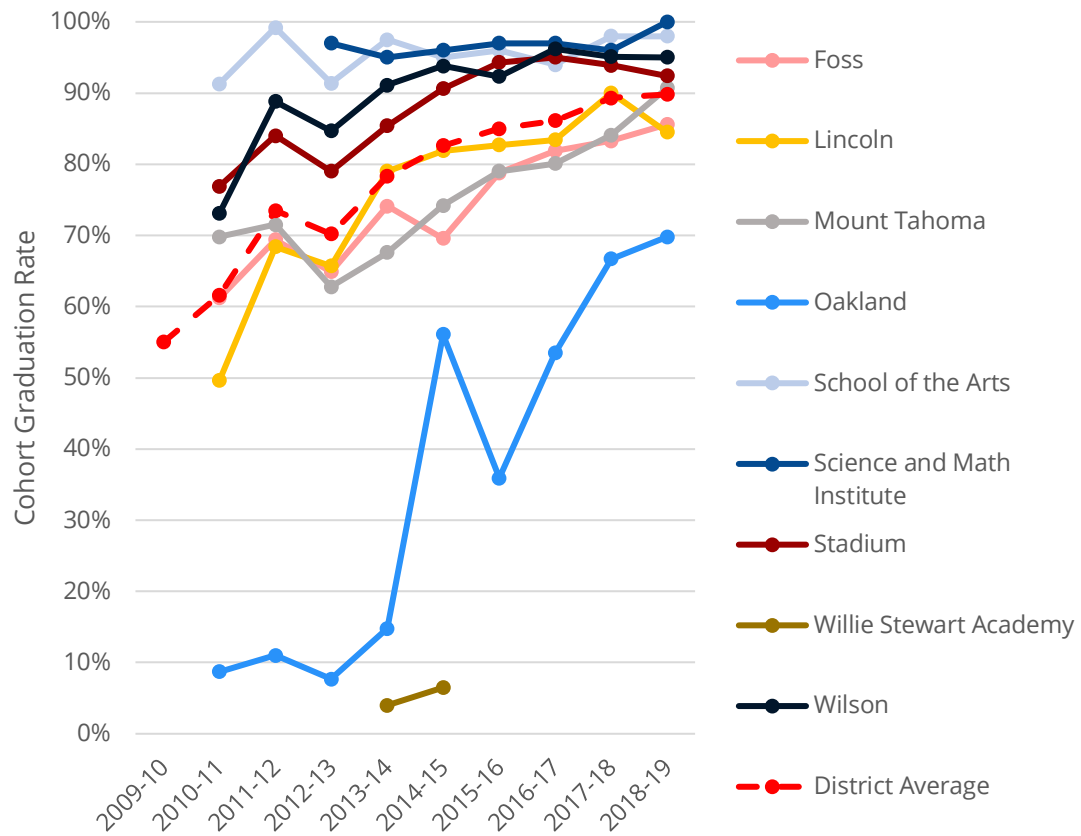
### **High school graduation rate**

The on-time four-year high school graduation rate in Tacoma has increased since 2010. In 2010, only 55% of TPS students graduated high school within four years, and as described in Chapter 4, acted as an alarm to the Tacoma education community to address collectively. By 2019, 89.8% of TPS students graduated within four years, a 63% increase over nine years (see Figure 15) (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b; Washington OSPI, 2019). For comparison, in Washington state, between 2014 and 2018, the share of students who graduated in four years increased from 77.2% to 80.9%, a 4.8% increase (Washington OSPI, 2019). Nationally, cohort graduation rates have also steadily increased, from 79% in 2010-11 to 85% in 2016-17, a 7.6% increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). With the exception of Lincoln High School in 2019, every high school in Tacoma improved their high school graduation rates between 2010 to 2019.

Improvements to high school graduation rates also seem to be reducing racial and socioeconomic differences. High school graduation rates in Tacoma for almost all racial/ethnic groups increased between 2011 and 2019 (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b). Differences between racial/ethnic groups have also reduced sharply. While four-year high school graduation rates ranged from a low of 9% for multiracial students to a high of 66% for Asian and white students in 2011, respectively, by 2019, high school graduation rates ranged from a low of 81% for Pacific Islander students to a high of 93% for Asian and Native American students (see Figure 16).

**Figure 15**

*Four Year High School Graduation Rate by Tacoma Public High School, 2010-2019*



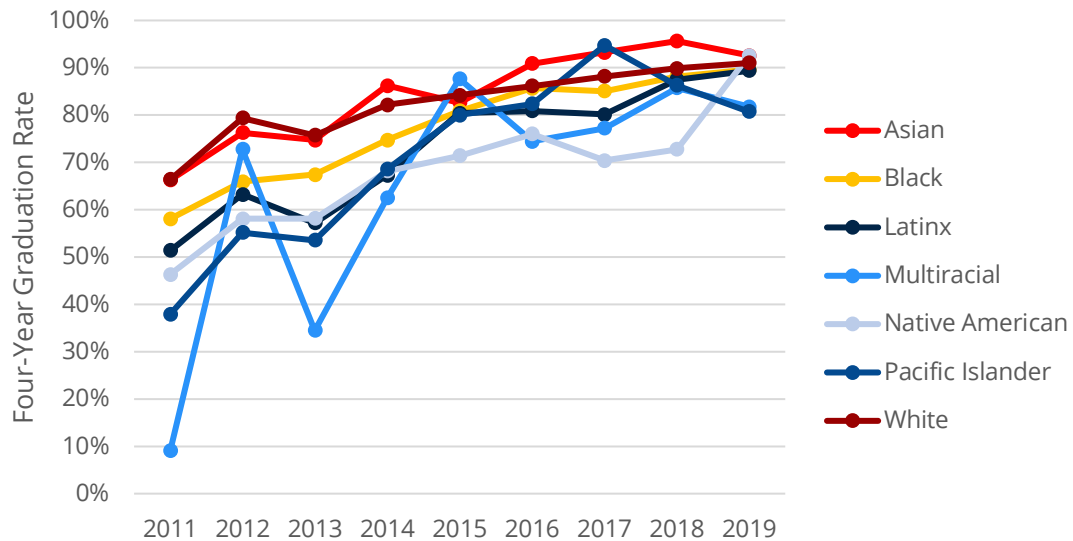
*Notes.* Graduation rate is based on a cohort of students. The cohort is made up of all students who start 9th grade together. Students who transfer into or out of a school are added or removed from the cohort. If students stop attending school, they are counted as 'dropouts'. If students have met graduation requirements, they are counted as 'graduates'. If students don't graduate but are still attending, they are considered 'continuing'. Students are tracked through their 7th year in high school.

*Source.* Graduate Tacoma (2020b) for 2010-2013; Washington OSPI (2019) for 2014-2019

Since 2017, Pacific Islander high school graduation rates have fallen by 14 percentage points and multiracial high school graduation rates have fallen four percentage points since 2018, opposite to trends of all other racial/ethnic groups in Tacoma.

**Figure 16**

*Four-Year High School Graduation Rates in Tacoma Public Schools by Race/Ethnicity, 2011-2019*



*Source.* Graduate Tacoma (2020b)

The difference in high school graduation rates for students in poverty and students not in poverty is also decreasing, from 17 percentage points in 2011 to 11 percentage points in 2019 (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b).

#### *Stakeholder perceptions of high school graduation outcomes*

The growth in high school graduation rates was recognized as a success by virtually all stakeholders. A City of Tacoma council member summed up their impression of progress on high school graduation, mostly from reading Graduate Tacoma's Community Reports, explaining:

Well, it's largely been good. I mean graduation rates have been increasing - we're over five points higher than the national average. My understanding is that most of those gains have been in underprivileged populations, not just cherry picking. But it's been the hard work of many small groups acting in concert because of the work of school administration, teachers, volunteers, community supporters. (GT.22)

When Graduate Tacoma released their 2018 Community Report announcing that TPS' graduation rate was now 89.3%, news coverage also marked the occasion as the city reached its 85% high school graduation rate goal four years early (Dunkelberger, 2018; Lemke, 2018).

Several stakeholders also recognized the challenges that existed beyond the rising high school graduation rates. One education nonprofit leader voiced concern about attention only to high school graduation rates. They emphasized that rates may not capture all students in the TPS, alluding to those who may have been pushed out of the system for different reasons:

I mean, clearly, we can look at high school graduation and some of the other places where the network had made great strides. Honestly, even there, I mean, I think there's no way you can look at that or slice data or ask deeper questions that that's not good news, the success that we've had there. I'm not sure it quite lives up to the hype after you unpack and get to the what's actually happened in the numbers, but nonetheless, maybe 89 isn't the most fairest way to describe what's happened, but it's way better than it was. [...] What you never hear is like, "What's the denominator of that number?" No one's talking about who's not in the denominator anymore, which is a nerdy way to frame the question. But it matters, right? (GT.03)

A senior manager at a college access nonprofit in Tacoma also explained their preference for not having rising high school graduation rates take precedence over other educational outcomes:

I think graduation rates get way too much attention by the coalition and by the school district, where - and I think that's because there's a want to cheerlead and show success and pull us all together. I mean, for good reasons I think that gets emphasis, but I think to the detriment of some other indicators. [...] I also think the cheerleading gets in the way sometimes of seeing where we really need to work hard. I mean, I'm not sure I love those parts of our coalition that... there's nothing wrong with showcasing positives but to the detriment sometimes of doing the really hard work where we're not doing so well. (GT.16)

Tacoma stakeholders sometimes differed in who they attributed as responsible for graduation rate increases. Some stakeholders acknowledged the role of collaboration and partnership. For example, the TCSN Network Manager gave some credit to the role of Graduate Tacoma in helping align partners:

That's the \$100 question. What have our outcomes been? When you look at what actually has improved, it's mostly here in Tacoma on the big scale, it's our graduation rates that improved. Whatever we're doing to collaborate and align partners has had the biggest impact on graduation. (GT.25)

TPS' own website, in explaining "strategies that work" for improving high school graduation, noted "a large contingent of community partners – known as Graduate Tacoma – along with TPS set a goal of an 85% graduation rate by 2020 – a goal we reached four years early in 2016" acknowledging Graduate Tacoma's presence in the overall effort. A Tacoma Housing Authority stakeholder, involved in different Graduate Tacoma CANs, described the culture created from partnerships as one reason for improved graduation rates:

I would say if you look at what graduation rates have done in the City of Tacoma over the last five years and it's continued to grow, there's more and more individuals who are graduating on that four-year trajectory. And I think that what we do as a community and through partnerships, regardless of however little piece we have in those partnerships. If we're just supporting it, if we're modeling behavior, we're making sure that activities are up in our properties as well as our office building. I think what we're doing is really part of that shifting culture like rewarding good behavior on a greater scale. (GT.12)

Most stakeholders gave more weight to the leadership of the TPS in helping improve graduation rates. A TPS administrator once active in the TCSN and now participating in other Graduate Tacoma CANs, elaborated on the importance of leadership within the TPS for orchestrating a widespread response to improve high school

graduation rates. They expounded on this leadership – especially among the school board, superintendent, and deputy superintendent:

I would say leadership, leadership, leadership. I would zero in on 55.5 percent. I was here when our deputy superintendent, Josh Garcia, came in. And I've worked with Carla Santorno, and our relentless school board. That said... they said a lot of things. So, one of the things that resonated with me that I wanted to work in for organization, is they said that we're going to be transparent. That we'll be innovative, we'll be relentless, and we'll be nurturing. Those are the words of our school board. And they meant that when they said it. And so they took the 55.5 percent graduation and went to work on it. You know that *USA Today* didn't go to work on it. The Board, and the administration went to work on it, and used everything they could to do it. The community partners, every tool or device, for the policy, removing every barrier, providing every opportunity. (GT.26)

TPS stakeholders also emphasized the role of a districtwide strategy called the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative for helping support high school graduation and school improvement more generally. Started in January 2012, the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative (TWCI) is a ten-year collaboration with the UW Tacoma's Center for Strong Schools to change school climates and approaches to working with young children by centering not only their academic, but also social and emotional needs (Rhinehart, 2014). Central to the initiative is the implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), a framework for approaching school discipline that emphasizes defining and teaching appropriate behaviors as well as modeling and reinforcing those positive behaviors (Tacoma Public Schools, n.d.). Other pillars within the TWCI approach were reforms to social and emotional learning, physical and mental wellness, trauma sensitive practices, signature whole child practices, restorative practices, tiered supports for students, and emphasis on continuous improvement cycles using “data to inform a small step-by-step incremental improvement strategy” (Tacoma Public Schools, n.d., para. 8). A video about the partnership explains that the TWCI teaches what “respectful and



responsible looks like” to create safe, welcoming, and equitable learning environments that are “built to last” (UWT, 2014).

A staff member working in the only TPS high school for at least the first three cohorts of the TWCI credited the initiative with making large systems improvements within Tacoma, particularly around high school graduation:

I mean, really, I would give it to the Whole Child movement and just the support of seeing kids is more than just numbers. Putting in those supports, those psychologists in the building and doing those kinds of systems changes - that's what I think has made the impact. (GT.18)

A central office TPS administrator particularly emphasized district leadership for implementing the TWCI:

The Whole Child Initiative that you talked about? I credit all of that to our school board, and our superintendent's office, and the deputy superintendent, Josh Garcia, who is a national speaker. Chicago Public Schools called me last week, and so it's kind of like is that something that the mayor of Chicago told the superintendent of the school district in Chicago that they should be looking at Tacoma for some of this stuff. (GT.26)

A staff member in the TPS described their perception of the intentionality of systems being built to support TWCI across district schools:

They were building very intentional reports and very tension like tracking systems for behavior and things like that. And also just supporting those social, like, bringing counselors, psychologists and all that kind of stuff. At a system level for the district, I know that was very intentional and it wasn't ... And because it rolled out slowly, I don't think it was different perspective because our building was definitely like, ‘Yeah, we want to do this.’ (GT.18)

Various stakeholders also called attention to the district’s use of data and a culture shift in focusing on graduation rates as reasons for rising high school graduation rates.

Tacoma Public School’s website included specific attention to instruction, communication, and data tracking in helping reach its graduation goals:

Our high schools have adopted strategies to assist students who are struggling to meet new rigorous state standards known as the Common Core State Standards. In fact, Tacoma's graduation rates have already improved thanks to increased time for tutoring and instruction, seminar/study periods, communicating and working with families and community partners, and new data tracking and analysis systems. (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020c)

A TPS assistant principal who was aware of but not a regular attendee at the TCSN meetings, also attributed improvements to high school graduation rates to shifts in discussions about improving test scores to improving graduation:

I think the biggest thing, just the ... I've seen over the last few years is just the conversation around graduation and the conversation around the data around graduation, I guess. I knew that, when we were in the 60s. I knew we were in the 60s because for whatever reason, [...] I would go on the state website and look at our numbers, I guess. But the conversation was not happening about...the conversation was happening about test scores and whatever. But, like graduation rate conversations were not being had. (GT.18)

Alluding to shifts in school practices, an active TCSN leadership committee member acknowledged the accountability mechanisms within school buildings to find “every last kid” who could have graduated:

Participant: Part of why high school graduations got better, I mean, yes, there's all the collaboration, but it's also because every single week, high school principals are getting reports. I mean, that's one of the most important things they're measured on. And so, yeah, they're finding every last kid. (GT.03)

Author: Was that more of a shift just in the school district policy-like put the data in front of you, hold you accountable in some way?

Participant: Yeah. I mean, it became a laser focus to the district. (GT.03)

The TPS administrator familiar with data practices in school buildings described the system to accurately count “non-graduates” as critical to improving high school graduation rates:

But I think part of that also was some systems that one of our principals came in and put in place. There were more systems around...like when you look at graduation rates, some of them have a lot to do with negative withdrawals. I don't

want to downplay our graduation rate because it's great. But some schools do a much better job hunting down kids who have dropped off the face of the planet, because if you drop off the face of the planet and you've really enrolled somewhere else, you still count as a non-graduate for us. If you don't have systems to find those kids then... (GT.18)

Overall, stakeholders seemed to agree that the practices instituted by TPS – from senior leadership to building personnel – created a focus on high school graduation rates in the city. Partnerships may have supported momentum within the school district but changing district practices, particularly around attention to data and focus on student social and emotional needs, seemed more influential in stakeholders' eyes for improving high school graduation outcomes.

### **College Bound Scholarship sign-up and repledge**

The TCSN's early activities promoting College Bound Scholarship (CBS) sign-ups in the region and achieving 100% sign-up rates between 2011 and 2013 provided indications of promising results for stakeholders united around a common goal. One TPS department leader involved in the early days of the TCSN spoke of the work on College Bound sign-ups as a core example of the contributions of the district to systemic change, emphasizing the critical role of TPS counselors in achieving broader systemic impact:

When I was on TCSN as a member, our assistant superintendent... You know? When we set the goal of 100 percent of our eligible eighth graders would be registered for CBS by June 30th of their eighth-grade year - and this is back when it's the paper and pencil process. And our school counselors at the middle school level and some of the partners just worked their hearts out to do that. We hit 100 percent a couple of years in a row. And so it was through focused efforts, and recursive messaging, and understanding a priority that you had... that they stepped up. (GT.26)

Reflecting on those impacts, this TPS representative underscored the dedicated work that it took among TPS staff to achieve those results:

And so it takes dedicated professionals to think deeply, work deeply into the work. Because I could show you... You know? Neighboring school districts at that time that weren't getting any College Bound Scholars to sign up. You know? I remember superintendents calling over here and asking "How did you guys do that? Did you forge parents' signatures?" I mean, serious... I'm not making that up. And the answer's of course, "No, we didn't forge signatures. Our staff worked extremely hard to get those signatures." (GT.26)

Based on a "reconciled" reporting methodology from WSAC, the administrator of the College Bound Scholarship, Tacoma has not maintained near 100% sign-up rates. For graduating cohorts in 2019 to 2023 (8<sup>th</sup> graders in 2015-2019), sign-up rates moved from 79% in 2015 to 81% in 2019. These sign-up rates were still higher than the regional educational service district rate in 2019 (77%) and the state average in the same year (71%) (Figure 11; WSAC, 2020c). Among TPS middle schools, excluding juvenile detention centers and other special service schools, sign-up rates ranged from 69% to 91% for the Class of 2023 (WSAC, 2020c).

#### *Stakeholder perceptions on CBS sign-up outcomes*

Among TCSN stakeholders, there may be an assumption that the initial partnership developed by TPS, the Tacoma Housing Authority, College Success Foundation, and other TCSN members would continue to bolster College Bound Scholarship sign-up activity. Estimating higher sign-up rates than WSAC (2020) suggests, the TCSN Network Manager discussed the "systems in place" so that the process is "taken over by the schools:"

College Bound Scholarship-that's how we started as a network, and those rates used to be a lot lower. We're close to the high-80 to 90 percent with those signups. And they happen now, they've been taken over by the schools and in partnership with the College Success Foundation. We have partnered with our building counselors and College Bound staff to make sure they feel supported, that they are not alone, and they can ask for help when they need it. I think that empowers their abilities to support College Bound sign ups. (GT.25)

While the Tacoma Housing Authority continues to provide information about the Scholarship and includes the application in their housing materials (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2014), current Tacoma Housing Authority staff also emphasized different activities and indicated more passive support for College Bound Scholarship sign-ups. THA's website describing the College Bound Scholarship Enrollment Project states that THA "has been able to subordinate its enrollment efforts to that of Tacoma Public Schools, which now signs up 100% of eligible eighth graders every year" (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2013, para. 3). One Tacoma Housing Authority supervisor described being less aware of how the College Bound Scholarship process is still implemented within THA's systems:

The College Bound, if I'm not mistaken that is like an automatic form that we send out with our annual certification paperwork. That families return it, fill out for us but I'm not aware of the process of that. (GT.12)

A different Tacoma Housing Authority manager described more activity among their other core education-focused programming including the Elementary School Housing Assistance Program, Children's Saving Account (CSA), and College Housing Assistance Program (CHAP):

So, I would say that right now, a lot of these programs, I would say the most active ones are the ESHAP, the CSA, and the College Housing Assistance Program, the CHAP program, and those kind of actively live within our Policy Department's hands. (GT.15)

The recent declines in College Bound Scholarship sign-up rates may reflect the difficulty in sustaining momentum across multiple partners for one strategy.

Organizational stakeholders in the TCSN are reassessing ways to support the College Bound Scholarship effort, an event that effectively created a citywide College Bound repledge effort for high school students one day out of the year. College Bound repledge

campaigns are one practice supported by the statewide Washington College Access Network, a subsidiary organization of the College Success Foundation that especially focuses on College Bound Scholarship sign-ups through its network of K-12 schools, districts, state agencies, and other college access providers (Washington College Access Network, 2020).

Stakeholders discussed the considerations for ending the one-day College Bound Saturday event and instead splitting sign-up and financial education events to happen quarterly. As a major leader in previous College Bound Scholarship sign-up efforts, stakeholders from the College Success Foundation indicated how their feedback is shifting what support from the TCSN looks like for College Bound Saturday and sign-up efforts. A senior leader for the organization described their efforts not to necessarily change approaches within the College Success Foundation, but instead to try to influence the TCSN's strategy:

You know, I wouldn't say it's completely changed anything that we do. The only thing I would say is we try to partner in things that they do. Like we used to partner heavily with College Bound Saturday, but we also told them too that it wasn't meeting the needs of all students and so what can we do to change how that looks? And now that's completely transforming. (GT.07)

Another College Success Foundation staff member underscored how their feedback along with staffing constraints across TCSN stakeholders put the College Bound Saturday event into question:

I do think it was feedback from a number of people. So a number of organizations and people that were involved in College Bound Saturday. But I did feel like I had to be very adamant that I was not involved this year, to help precipitate some of that. I felt like I wasn't... some of my concerns weren't being heard. (GT.16)

This stakeholder also described that staff reorganization due to budget cuts within the TPS also limited the ability for others in the TCSN to put on the event. In this case, the

College Success Foundation was able to exert its influence as a major partner in this event to ultimately shift focus and “make a hard stance” (GT.16) not to run College Bound Saturday in the same way as previous years.

Other stakeholders also perceived that the event no longer met student needs. Emphasizing the need to ensure the event provided timely financial aid information to students, a TCSN stakeholder from a different college access nonprofit explained reasoning behind the decisions in greater detail:

We are going to do College Bound, well, initially it was we were going to do College Bound Saturday series where instead of doing just one Saturday in the spring where it doesn't help to hear what you should have done for financial aid, we're trying to do it quarterly. So maybe doing one in the fall about financial aid and that relevant information and then having a workshop attached to it to understand your College Bound scholarships. But now we've started thinking, well, ‘Can't we invite everybody and then just make sure we have a workshop that College Bound students could attend or need to attend while they're there?’ We want to like break up what we were covering on College Bound Saturday and do it more timely and in more accessible places for the community. So enough about us and making sure we can get a good picture and more about actually making sure we have students coming and that they're really understanding stuff. (GT.09)

A senior director for another Tacoma college access nonprofit also described the need for more intentionality behind the event, particularly to ensure the needs of low-income students, for whom the Scholarship targets, are being met:

First, the College Bound Saturday, I know that feedback has been given over the last three years around this is not an event that ... one day cannot do all we need to have done. This is the first year that it's not happening, so it needs to be revamped or rethought around how can we actually lift up the relationship that we want to have with students and families. What are the components of College Bound Saturday that we want students and families to still take with them? How can we ensure that every school has these opportunities while also mitigating for cultural competency? There are some schools that are a little more equipped to handle these conversations than others. As a network, do we honestly trust that the school can do well through these conversations considering that this scholarship is designed for our lower-income students? (GT.17)

While not explicitly stated, these considerations for the College Bound Saturday event indicate, to some extent, an acknowledgement that College Bound sign-up rates are not what they once were and that the event is not as impactful as it could potentially be for continuing to engage eligible students in their college-going efforts. This shift in strategy also suggests how one organization, the College Success Foundation, can influence discussions in the TCSN. These discussions ultimately influenced how members of the TCSN reassessed its work together to consider impacts for students in more lasting ways – not just through one-day events, but through more meaningful engagement with students and families.

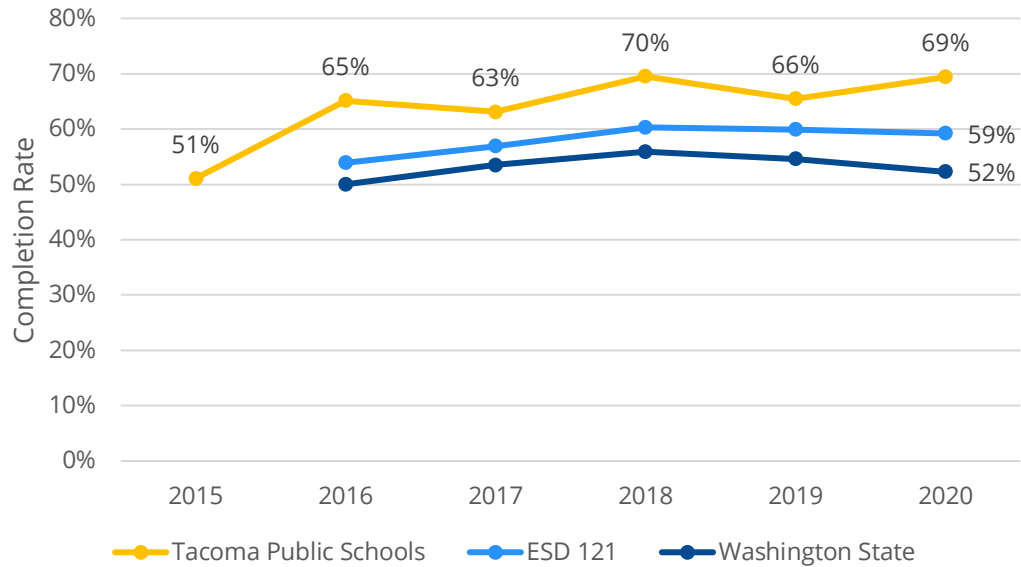
#### **Financial aid application completion**

Another indicator of college-going that TCSN's College Bound Identity and Paying for College work groups use as an indicator of progress is the rate that high school seniors are applying for federal financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Based on Figure 17, FAFSA completion rates among TPS students have outpaced both the regional educational service district and state completion rates. In 2020, 69% of students in TPS filed the FAFSA, up from 51% in 2015, whereas only 59% and 52% of students in the educational service district and state did so (see Figure 17). FAFSA completions rates disaggregated by other subgroups were not available.



**Figure 17**

*FAFSA Completion Rates for Tacoma Public Schools, Educational Service District (ESD) 121, and Washington State, 2015-2020*

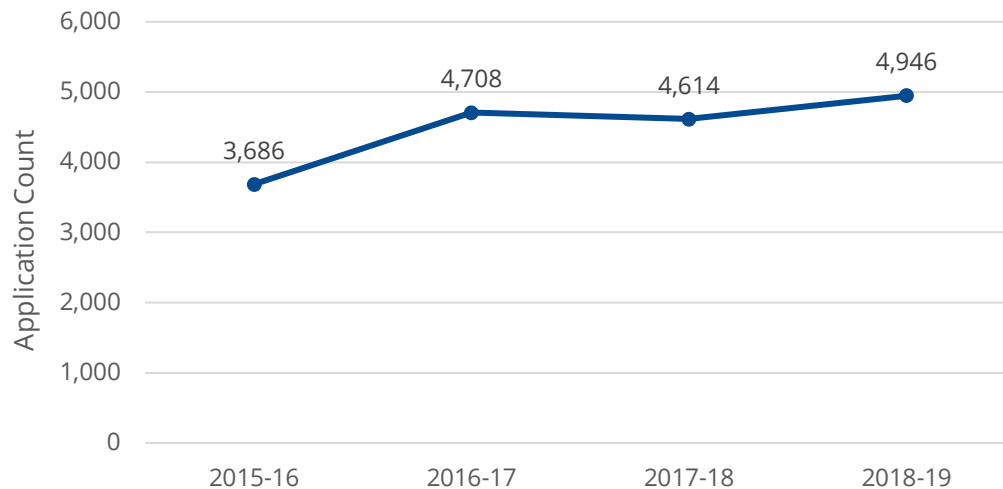


Source. WSAC (2020d)

Students in Washington State who cannot file for federal student aid (e.g., undocumented students, students in federal loan default) are eligible to apply for state financial aid through the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA). Available data indicates that WASFA application submissions increased by 34.2% between 2016 and 2019 (Figure 18). From these applications, the share of students considered low-income (based on College Bound Scholarship award rates) increased from 9.6% in 2016 to 18.6% in 2019, indicating more low-income students are being served by the program (WSAC, 2019).

**Figure 18**

*Total WASFA Applications in Washington State, 2016-2019*



*Notes.* 2019-20 application figures were preliminary estimates halfway through the award cycle in 2019 (6 months) and are not shown here. Based on WSAC (2019), 3,287 applications had been submitted in the 2019-20 award cycle.

*Source.* WSAC (2019)

*Stakeholder perceptions of financial aid application outcomes*

As indicated by TCSN's Network Manager, increasing financial aid application rates is a relatively recent focus for the TCSN and has been advanced by its Paying for College work group. Noting the importance of financial aid for college success, this stakeholder described the shift occurring within TCSN to align with statewide financial aid efforts by dedicating a work group for the first time to financial aid strategies:

I would say that we are much more aligned and starting to work harder and more collectively around, for example, FAFSA and WASFA completions. That wasn't going on at all in our community before. It's such a key step. You cannot access any scholarships. You cannot access any funding without taking that step. Now, again, we don't have these big numbers ... we have actually had an increase in our FAFSA and WASFA completion over the past years and our data on our website shows those, but we still have a long way to go. But that's an area, we're working with both, at our table we have the Washington Student Achievement Council. They're working on statewide efforts. We're really aligned with them. For this first year we actually have a work group specifically working on those strategies. We're getting a lot more down the line towards that. That would be an area that, I

would say, is one of our key priorities and we're going to continue to double down in that. That wouldn't be happening without TCSN working together. (GT.25)

Despite being a priority, few stakeholders discussed financial aid completion efforts instituted by the TCSN. One member of the Paying for College work group and senior director at a college access nonprofit described the one-day, multiple site citywide event as the most explicit strategy for trying to increase FAFSA completion rates:

So throughout the city, we have ... next Saturday is April 22nd and so we are hosting an all-day drop-in, complete your FAFSA. We have some data that shows that 57% of our seniors still have not completed their FAFSA. And so, it's both the day for that to happen and also for those students to have financial aid award letters for us to talk through what their financial aid award letter really means and to consider certain options. (GT.17)

Advertised as a partnership with TCSN, Graduate Tacoma, and TPS (Graduate Tacoma, 2019a), the multi-site event, according to this stakeholder, is “still very volunteer-based and people are kind of using their connections” (GT.17). Five community organizations (e.g, Boys & Girls Club of Pierce County, Eastside Community Center, Peace Community Center, Tacoma Community College, and Tacoma Urban League) offered their spaces for free. The Paying for College work group also helps coordinate staffing for the multi-site event who are knowledgeable and trained. Explained by this stakeholder, “But I know that as a subcommittee, we are offering to pool our resources to staff throughout the site if they’re unable to staff themselves or if they’re able to staff, but they just don’t have the competency around that...” (GT.17). A flyer for the FAFSA/WASFA completion event in April 2019 indicated that several TCSN members did staff the event across multiple locations, along with other partners from the Washington Student Achievement Council and Tacoma Urban League (Graduate Tacoma, 2019).

Stakeholders also discussed other considerations for implementing activities to increase financial aid application rates, particularly in targeting geographic areas typically underserved in Tacoma. For instance, one Paying for College work group member, explained an intentional strategic focus on “targeting the minority areas” and being able to provide FAFSA completion workshops as core parts of TCSN’s strategies:

I know for our group specifically, we're just hoping to increase in general the numbers of students that are completing their applications for FAFSA and WASFA. And we're just primarily targeting the minority areas, so there's a lot of Hispanic and native students living on the east side. So we'll think that through, providing that through being present in those areas, that they'll just help increase that, plus, it's sometimes being able to see a presence of workshops happening on a regular basis, my students who want to go to those workshops. (GT.23)

A University of Washington Tacoma director described discussions in the TCSN about how to work with staff to make the financial aid process less stigmatizing for undocumented students who may not feel comfortable asking for support to complete the WASFA. Said the stakeholder:

We had one of our practitioners who right in this very heightened political environment is really unsafe for families to come forward and say, ‘Hey I needed this different form.’ So we had great training with one of our really deep local community experts about how to talk about it. About what they are hearing from the students and families that they're working with and an invitation for our community members to embrace the practices and suggestions that they put forward. (GT.06)

Providing services in higher-need areas of the city may hold promise as the TCSN further defines and strategizes how to increase financial aid application completion, given the rising FAFSA completion rates for the district. The TCSN’s work may be following general trends across Washington state to increase focus on WASFA application submissions, but without district-specific data, the potential influence that the TCSN has on WASFA submissions are unclear.

### **Verified Acceptance at Next Institution (VANI) completion**

In 2013, TPS added completion of the Verified Acceptance at Next Institution (VANI) form as a high school graduation requirement (Graduate Tacoma, 2018c). To complete the VANI form, students must identify whether they have been accepted into at least one postsecondary institution, attach copies of acceptance letters and documents received, and/or identify whether they plan to attend a postsecondary institution the following academic year (Stadium High School, 2020; Wilson High School, 2020). While not emphasized as heavily by TCSN stakeholders, improving VANI completion rates is tied to TCSN's College Bound Identity work group goals and several other strategies implemented across the Graduate Tacoma network (see Table 6).

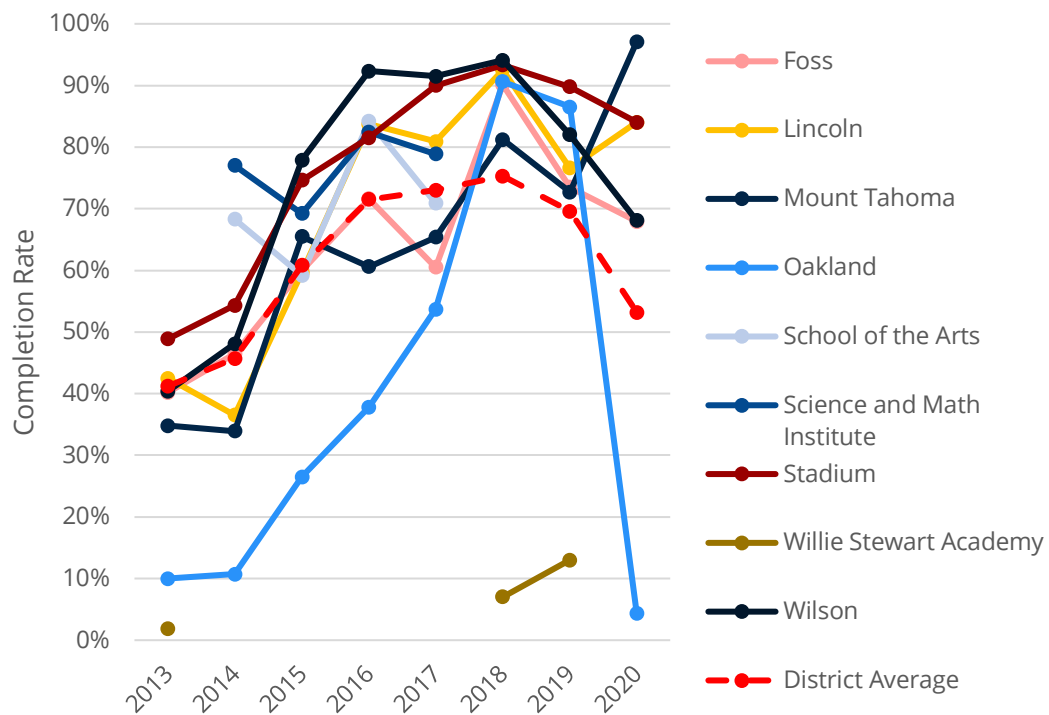
TPS instituted VANI form completion as a district mandate to help implement the state-mandated High School and Beyond Plan college and career planning process. The state requires that all high school students complete a High School and Beyond Plan to meet Washington state high school graduation requirements but allows districts to develop their own processes (Revised Code of Washington, 2020; Washington State Board of Education, 2017). According to TPS' website, the school district "is the first school district in Washington to create a comprehensive process for monitoring student acceptance to postsecondary education" (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020b, para. 2). The High School and Beyond Plan legislation states, "A district may establish additional, local requirements for a high school and beyond plan to serve the needs and interest of its students and the purpose of this section (Revised Code of Washington, 2020, RCW§ 28A230.090, Section G, subsection (d)). The VANI form process, according to the district website, "strengthens our culture of college-going and post-secondary

planning by infusing an expectation that every Tacoma student can and will be successful in their life after high school” (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020b, para. 2).

According to district data in Figure 19, VANI completion rates increased from 41% in 2013 to 75% by 2018. VANI completion rates dropped to 70% in 2019 and, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, stood at 53% in 2020.

**Figure 19**

*VANI Completion Rates by Tacoma High School, 2013-2020*

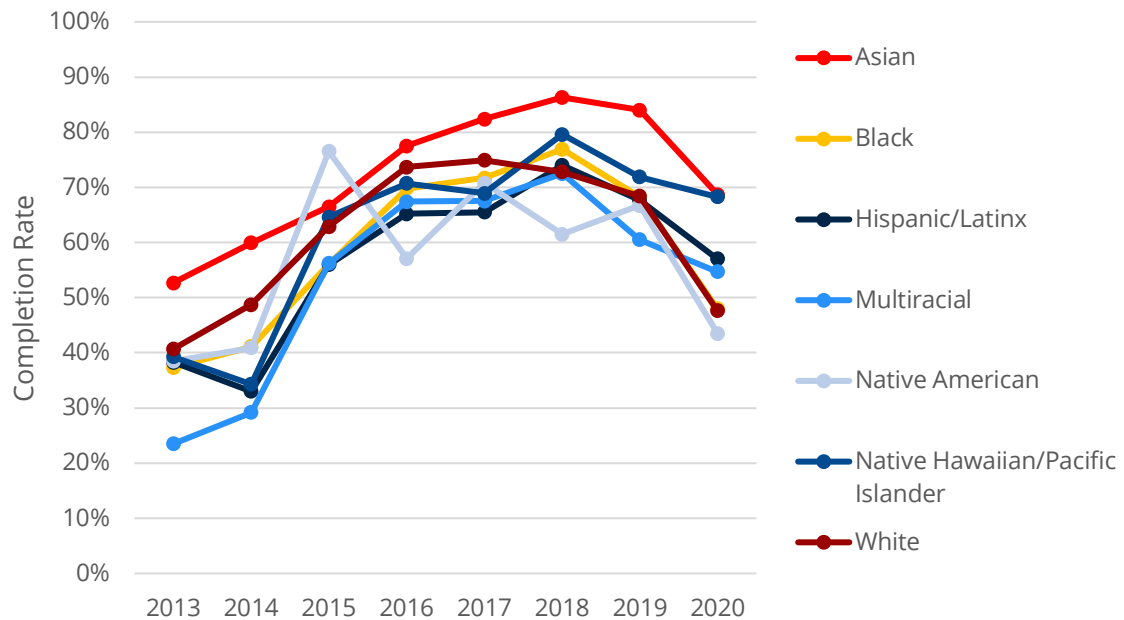


Source. Tacoma Public Schools (2020b)

VANI completion rates improved for almost all groups, except for Native American and white students, between 2013 to 2018. Differences between those with the highest and lowest VANI completion rates fell by about 15% over that period. However, from 2018 to 2020, VANI completion rates have fallen for all racial/ethnic groups (Figure 20).

**Figure 20**

*VANI Completion Rates for Tacoma Public Schools by Race/Ethnicity, 2013-2020*



*Notes.* Prior to 2017-18, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander only refers to Pacific Islander students due to changes in race/ethnicity categories. Years represent spring of academic year (e.g., 2012-13 school year is 2013).

*Source.* Tacoma Public Schools (2020b)

VANI completion rates for students in poverty, compared to those not in poverty (as measured by free and reduced-price lunch status), also appear to be improving. In 2018 (first year available), rates of VANI completion were 43 percentage points lower for students in poverty than those who were not. In 2020, students in poverty completed VANI forms at three percentage points higher than those not in poverty (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020b).

#### *Stakeholder perceptions of VANI completion*

Despite being a TCSN outcome indicator, only TPS stakeholders made some mention of the VANI process. One TPS administrator highlighted the VANI process as

an example for how the district committed to improving a high school completion and college-going culture:

We're one of the first districts in the state. We're probably the first district in the state, one of the few in the country, that built our own system for VANI and reporting that. That was all in-house. Now the state of Washington is looking to do that. So I can say there were different directors[...]. There were others that said 'You know what? It might not be easy work. There's no map. But we're going to blaze the trail.' And so I think a lot that goes back to these attitudes. (GT.26)

A college and career counselor in TPS described the VANI process as being more of a “numbers game” rather than a benchmark for the district to show “TPS students are prepared for further education, qualified, and proving it by being admitted” (GT.21). Describing the problems inherent in the VANI process, the counselor explained that some students may not be academically ready or may fill out the form to comply without real intention of pursuing that particular path:

Having an acceptance from a CTC [career and technical college] is not a declaration that you have reached college level work. That's not quite an honest view. The second thing is it becomes something of a numbers game. 'Just apply so we can say you have a VANI even though that's not what you're planning to do for someone.' A VANI is an acceptance to some kind of college or a contract, a military contract. (GT.21)

The counselor felt some discomfort with pushing students to apply to college only to increase VANI numbers. For them, the VANI process does not support students who want to pursue other options or prefer to wait to enroll. These feelings made the counselor question how crucial the VANI process is to helping students develop their post-high school plans.

Increasing VANI form completion rates may signal eventual college-going behaviors of high school students. But these district perspectives combined with little attention given from other stakeholders at college access nonprofits or at postsecondary



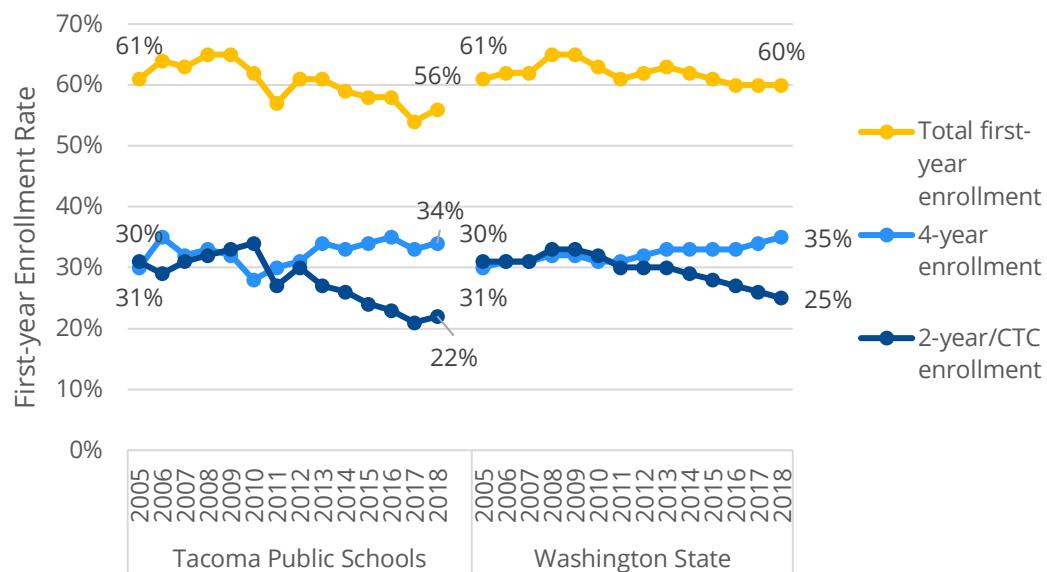
institutions suggest that despite the district mandates, the VANI process is not a critical priority for TCSN’s collaborative work. As the next subsection describes, despite VANI form completion increases, there still may be disconnects between rising high school graduation rates and eventual postsecondary enrollment.

### Postsecondary enrollment and completion

Despite documented gains in high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment and completion rates are declining for TPS graduates. Total first-year enrollment immediately after high school in either two or four-year institutions decreased five percentage points from 61% in 2005 to 56% in 2018 in TPS (ERDC, 2020) (Figure 21).

**Figure 21**

*Total First-Year College Enrollment and Enrollment by Institution Type for Tacoma Public Schools and Washington State, 2005-2018*



*Notes.* Total first-year enrollment includes those enrolling in two-year or career and technical colleges and four-year enrollments. Years listed refer to graduation year cohorts.

*Source.* ERDC (2020)

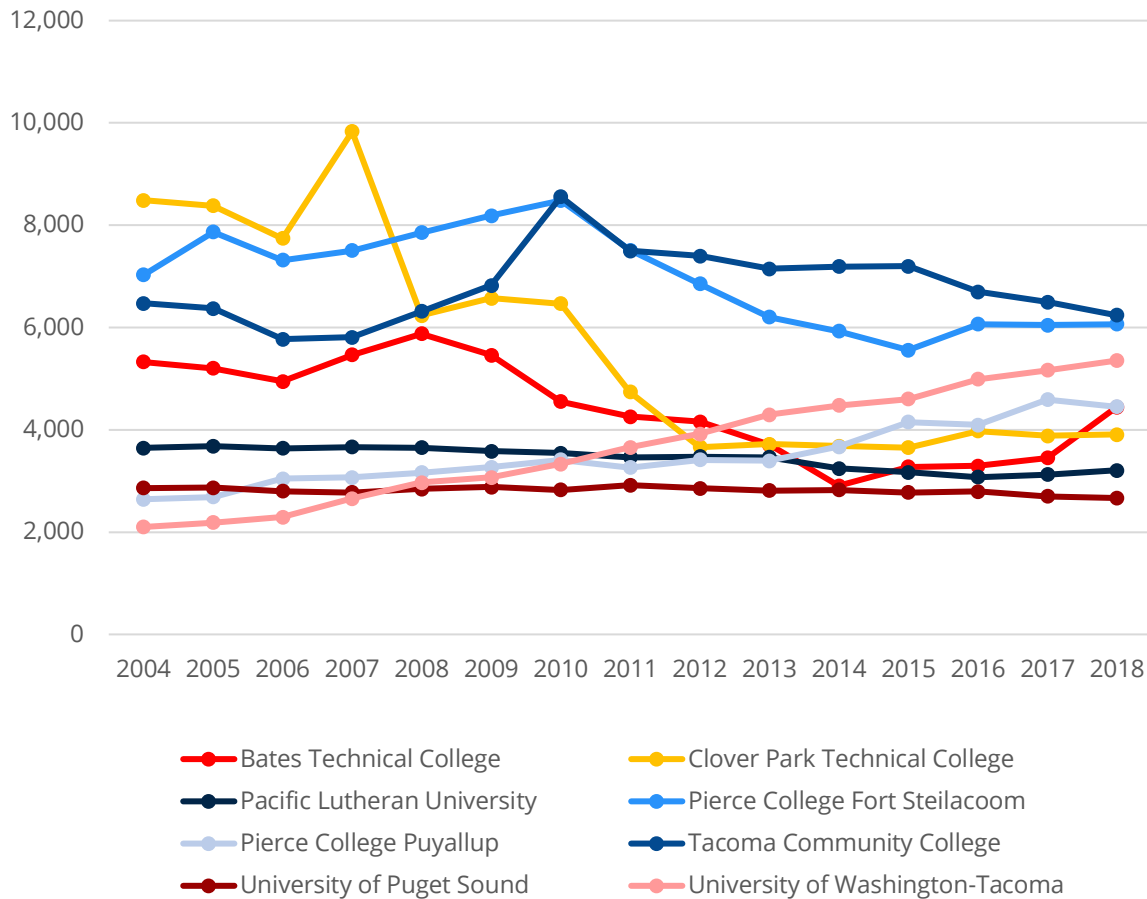
By comparison, total first-year enrollment decreased by one percentage point for Washington state high school graduates – from 61% in 2005 to 60% in 2018.

Despite overall first-year enrollments declining from 2011 to 2018, four-year enrollments for TPS students began exceeding two-year or career and technical college enrollments, a trend that also occurred at the state level. Between 2005 to 2018, four-year enrollment increased 13.3% from 30% to 34% of total first-year enrollments for Tacoma Public School high school graduates. By contrast, two-year or career and technical college enrollments declined by 29% for the same period (Figure 21).

When examining total enrollments for Tacoma postsecondary institutions (Figure 22), much of the increase in four-year enrollment seems driven by increasing enrollments at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT). Between 2004 and 2018, UWT total enrollments increased 155% whereas enrollment rates for University of Puget Sound and Pacific Lutheran University, the other four-year institutions in the Greater Tacoma area, remain relatively unchanged.

**Figure 22**

*Total Enrollment by Tacoma Postsecondary Institution, 2004-2018*



*Source.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2004-2018, Fall Enrollment component. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>

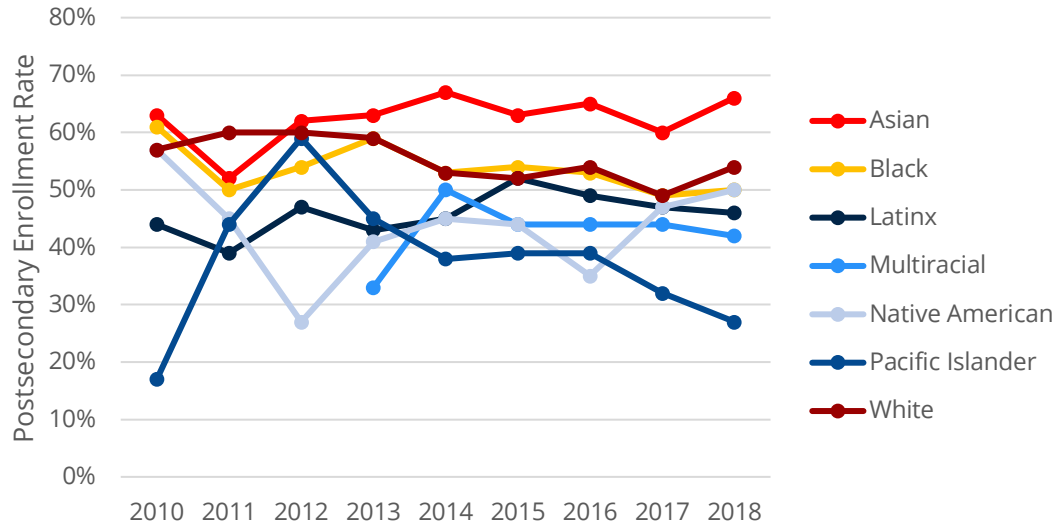
Available data are limited in confirming whether increases in UWT's total enrollment came from enrollments of TPS graduates. State data suggest a 24% increase in undergraduates who enrolled into the UW System from Pierce County between Fall 2007 and Fall 2018, but do not disaggregate by campus branch or school districts (ERDC, 2020). Based on archived website data from UWT in 2018, two of the five top high schools reported to have enrolled into UWT were Tacoma Public high schools (Lincoln

and Foss High Schools) (UWT, 2018b). In Fall 2020, of the top five high schools represented for entering first-year students, TPS' Mount Tahoma High School was ranked first, but no other Tacoma high school made this list (UWT, 2020b). Increases in applications for a UWT program called Pathways to Promise (Rhinehart, 2015; UWT, 2015, 2018), meant to enroll and support students specifically from TPS and other regional school districts also show some suggestive, but inconclusive evidence that UWT is enrolling more TPS students. UWT's Pathways to Promise program reportedly increased applications from Tacoma and Puyallup school districts from 191 before the partnership was established in January 2013 to 280 applications by 2014 (Rhinehart, 2015). Overall, the extent to which four-year institution enrollment rates at UWT are due to increased enrollment of TPS graduates remains a question.

Racial/ethnic differences in postsecondary enrollment rates of Tacoma Public School students also remain (Figure 23). Between 2010 to 2018, postsecondary enrollment rates fell across most racial/ethnic groups. Postsecondary enrollment rates increased by 5% for Asian students and Latinx students, who made up 13% and 16%, respectively, of the high school age population in 2018 (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b; Tacoma Public Schools, 2020e). Differences over this period between Asian students (highest enrollment rate) and Pacific Islander students (lowest enrollment rate) narrowed by 15%, and Native American enrollment rates have begun to increase since 2016. Yet, these potential advances are still countered by lower enrollment rates among most other TPS students.

**Figure 23**

*Postsecondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity for Tacoma Public School Students, 2010-2018*



*Notes.* Postsecondary enrollment reflects matriculation to any institution by one year after high school graduation

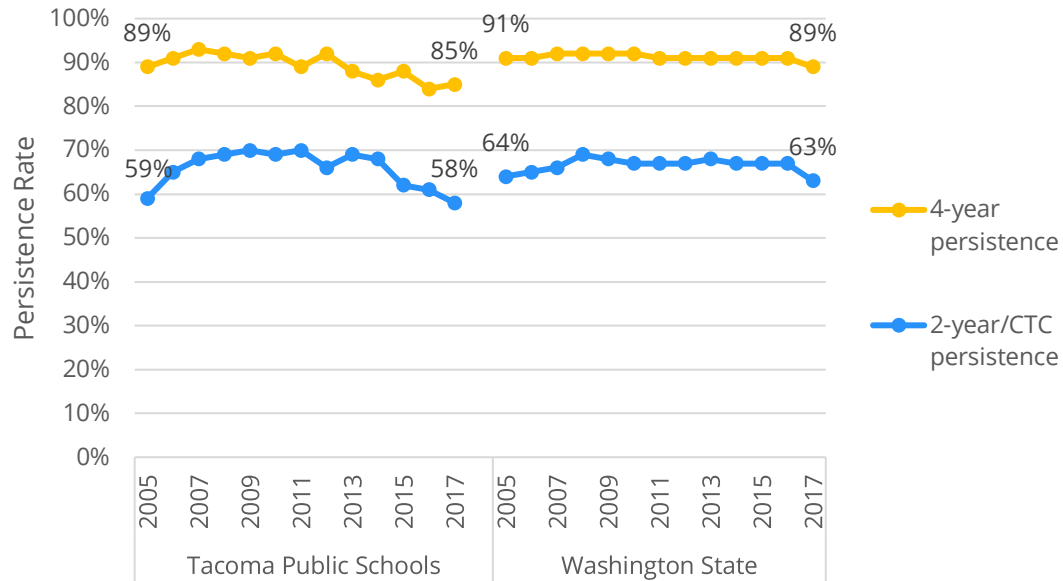
*Source.* Graduate Tacoma (2020b)

Differences in enrollment are increasing for students in poverty compared to students not in poverty. In 2010, the difference in postsecondary enrollment between these groups stood at 11 percentage points (52% in poverty vs. 63% not in poverty); by 2018, the difference increased to 20 percentage points (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b).

Persistence rates, defined as the continued enrollment in any institution the second year after high school graduation, are generally declining at two- and four-year institutions for TPS graduates when compared to Washington State (Figure 24).

**Figure 24**

*Persistence Rates for Tacoma Public Schools and Washington State by Sector, 2005-2017*

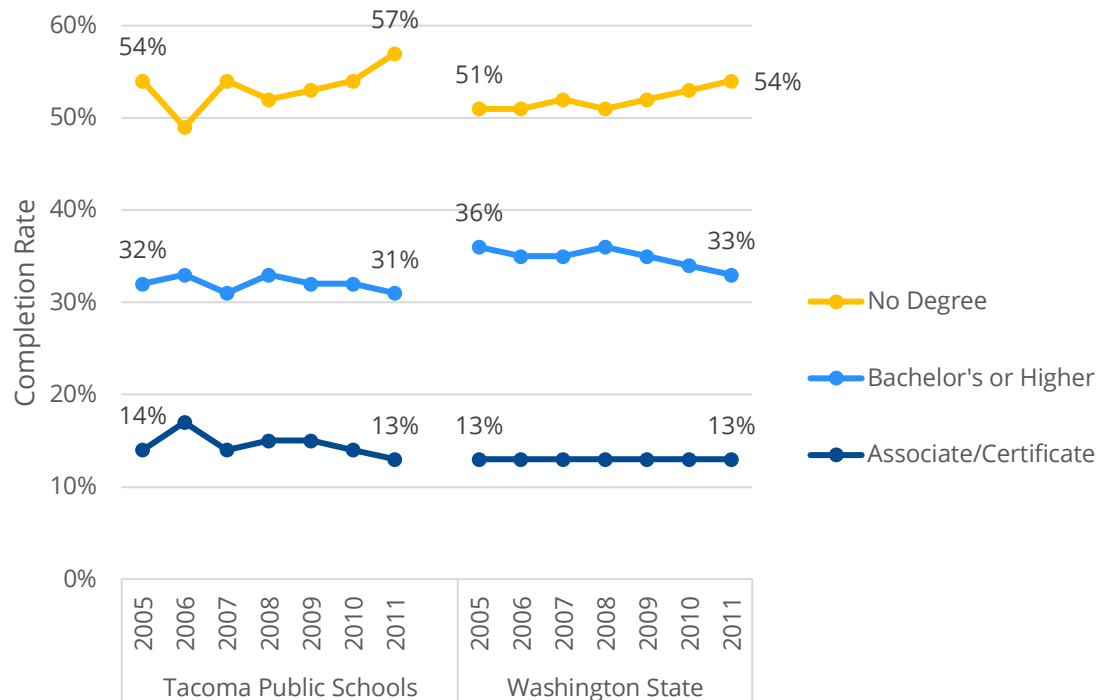


Source. ERDC (2020)

Eight-year college bachelor's, associate's, and certificate completion rates for 2005 to 2011 high school cohorts are generally unchanged for TPS graduates (Figure 25). Students with no degree increased for 2005 to 2011 graduating cohorts by 5.6%. A similar trend occurred for those cohorts at the state level.

**Figure 25**

*Postsecondary Completion Rates after Eight Years for Tacoma Public Schools and Washington State, Cohorts 2005 to 2011 (for completion years 2013-2019)*



*Notes.* Based on ERDC definitions provided, postsecondary completion is defined as having earned a degree or certificate at a postsecondary institution or completion of an apprenticeship program at some point in the eight academic years following high school graduation. If a student earns more than one degree or certificate during the eight-year period, the highest degree level attained is reported. Bachelor's degrees include completions of a 4-year degree. This category also contains Applied Baccalaureate Degrees offered at some 2 Year / CTCs. Associate degrees include completions of all types of associate's degrees (Direct Transfer Agreement, Transfer Degree, Applied Sciences, etc.) In this metric, if a student earns a bachelor's degree after completing an associate degree, they are only counted in the bachelor's degree category. Certificates include any completion of a certificate program at a 2- year institution. ERDC analyzes data from National Student Clearinghouse and the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges. For publicly funded four-year Washington institutions, ERDC utilizes data from the Public Centralized Higher Education Enrollment System existing in Washington's Office of Financial Management.

*Source.* ERDC (2020)

### *Stakeholder perceptions of enrollment and completion outcomes*

The mismatch between increasing high school graduation rates and flat or declining postsecondary enrollment and completion rates contextualizes the work that the TCSN faces in further promoting postsecondary access and completion. The TCSN

Network Manager summed up this shift in focus over the prior year toward postsecondary enrollment, explaining:

I would say that our network has been working most diligently, though, in college access enrollment. We have not really been ... when you look at our data, we haven't really been making that needle change very much. We're still at about 50%.

Another postsecondary institutional partner in Tacoma also confirmed the “deliberate” strategy for the TCSN to work more closely on postsecondary enrollment and completion activities.

This “pivot” in focus on postsecondary enrollment and completion is also resulting in new strategies among partners in the TCSN. One such initiative is Tacoma Completes, a partnership between Graduate Tacoma and Degrees of Change, a prominent member of the TCSN. According to a Graduate Tacoma announcement in February 2019, Tacoma Completes “envisions a comprehensive, coordinated community-wide system of supports helping all Tacoma Public School college-goers to persist through college to graduation” (Ervin, 2019). In 2019, the new effort included an environmental scan completed by a third-party consulting firm to better understand opportunities and barriers to postsecondary access and completion and inform the work of Tacoma Completes (BERK Consulting, 2019a, 2019b; Needles, 2019a). By May 2019, a director was hired and staffed within Degrees of Change to focus on developing partnerships with TCC and UWT and building intersections between existing educational strategies for degree completion and housing, workforce development, and transportation sectors. The TCSN Network Manager described the evolution of Tacoma Completes as “one of those gray areas that was co-owned by TCSN and Degrees of Change” (GT.25) and is now run as a program under the helm of Degrees of Change (Degrees of Change, 2020).



Tacoma Completes may facilitate ways that partners re-engage in the work of the TCSN or Graduate Tacoma more broadly. While the Tacoma Housing Authority was less active in the TCSN in earlier years, a THA representative described that the focus on college enrollment and completion is creating new conversations for how THA's College Housing Assistance program, in particular, can support this effort:

I think primarily for right now, we are understanding that there's a strong pivot by the Graduate Tacoma movement to really focus on that college enrollment and retention piece. And so we have had a couple of conversations with folks from Degrees of Change and Graduate Tacoma, and just asking, 'What are you guys doing right now? And what is it that with our resources and with our current leverage and position within the community, where do you guys see us plugging in?' (GT.15)

Of particular interest to the TCSN, according to this THA representative, is the College Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) within THA's Education Department. CHAP works with approximately 300 homeless or near homeless students attending either TCC or UWT. The THA supports these students' housing by providing rental assistance to pay rent in the private market, purchasing apartments near campus, or signing long term contracts with property developers near campuses to reserve apartments and subsidize rent for students (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2019). In addition to these housing supports, the institutions also help CHAP students pay security deposits and provide other emergency aid. Program supports between the institutions and the THA last up to five years for TCC students and four years for UWT students. Students must make adequate academic progress, maintain full-time enrollment (12 or more credits), maintain a 2.0 grade point average, and participate in support services (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2019).

Originally established in 2014 as a pilot program with TCC, the CHAP program helped house 47 homeless students at TCC. In comparison to 154 homeless TCC students not part of the pilot program, 60% of CHAP pilot program recipients graduated or remained enrolled versus 16% who did not receive assistance (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2020). These data informed the expansion of the program at TCC and its establishment in 2018 for students attending UWT. The program now also includes partnerships with TPS and the Washington State Department of Corrections (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2020).

The hope for Tacoma Completes, described by one of its current implementers, is to build a more robust college completion infrastructure across campuses and these sectors in order to capitalize on programs like CHAP and other available initiatives. These plans may, in due course, help address some postsecondary persistence and completion barriers in Tacoma.

### **Structural conditions influencing TCSN's postsecondary-related efforts (RQ3)**

The content and implementation of TCSN's postsecondary-related strategies across various organizational stakeholders, including the school district, housing providers, postsecondary institutions, and nonprofit institutions, reveal three forces related to collaboration structure and process: 1) how the TCSN is managed and facilitated, 2) the organizational missions of partners in TCSN work groups, and 3) how the TCSN receives and influences funding among stakeholders.

#### **TCSN management and facilitation**

To execute postsecondary strategies across work groups in the TCSN, stakeholders generally must commit to the meeting and facilitation processes for the

TCSN. Stakeholders may stay engaged and commit to different working groups because much of how Graduate Tacoma expects the CANs to operate is designed by the stakeholders themselves. The TCSN Network Manager walked through the process for how the TCSN developed its structure and goals, positioning organizational stakeholders as driving the governance structure:

We have five groups right now in TCSN, and those were all decided upon based on the partners in the group and what they wanted to focus in terms of strategies. And then those partners came up with Action Plans - and they created their own budgets - so they basically said, 'This is what we think we need to do this year, and this is how much money we think it's going to cost.' And some of those action budgets are for a large event. And somebody else - they were doing something on a very small scale and they just needed incentives for students to sign up for the College Bound scholarship at middle schools they were asking. It really depends, and what they did is they submitted a budget and then I put together all of their budgets and strategies. (GT.25)

The leadership committee for a Collaborative Action Network also plays a role in shaping work group structures and priorities. TCSN's leadership committee included eight individuals during the time of data collection (October 2018 to September 2019). Including the TCSN Network Manager, the TCSN leadership committee included representatives from local nonprofits, the College Success Foundation and Degrees of Change (which also now manages Act Six, one of the original TCSN members), the TPS, University of Washington Tacoma, University of Puget Sound, and Tacoma Community College (Graduate Tacoma, 2020e).

For the TCSN, not only do at least two leadership committee members co-facilitate CAN meetings each month, the leadership committee and work group leads meet during the summer months (July & August) to hold strategic planning retreats. In those meetings, the group revises action plans, assesses outcomes, and decides a budget for the network for the next year. The TCSN, like the other CANs, relies on self-reported

results from work group leaders “on what they feel like their wins were, their outcomes” (GT.25), which are then used to revise Action Plans and budgets for the upcoming year. The process to run the CANs is fluid – and as the TCSN Network Manager described – aspects of how the TCSN runs, especially in designing budgets – are a “new process:”

We're mid-year right now. The Foundation itself is January to January budget, but the actual work of TCSN, because it's so linked to the school year, is more of a September through September, the school year, actually September through June type of - when they're setting up their Action Plans. So, we still have, I would say, in terms of their spending, they've got another semester, the Fall, to enact some of their strategies. Again, this is a new process, I'll admit. Linking strategies to budgets, to data and outcomes, is our long-term goal. And we're on our way, but it's a very organic and not totally all together and crafted process. (GT.25)

The Network Manager of a CAN is also influential in shaping the momentum and engagement of a cross-sector collaboration. In the TCSN, the Network Manager is both responsible for the day-to-day logistics and communication across members of the TCSN and for executing larger programming efforts developed among work group and the leadership committee. These tasks encompass everything from organizing and setting up meeting agendas, collecting documents and blurbs of events and programs to share across the network, providing follow-up notes and takeaways electronically after each TCSN meeting via an e-mail listserv, and supporting TCSN's leadership committee to advance the CAN goals and ensure the CAN is on track to meet its desired goals. For the TCSN, the Network Manager also acted as a key contributor to managing all the supporting tasks not led by the TCSN but that help advance its goals as a CAN. For example, the TCSN Network Manager drove the coordination the College and Career Toolkits mailed to TPS middle and high school students every year and works to implement feedback and updates to those resources each year.

For college and career counseling staff in the TPS, creating and updating the College and Career Toolkits has been one of the main ways they have interacted with the TCSN. As one college and career counselor noted about the Toolkit creation process, the Network Manager:

sends it to all of us [...] sends drafts and I have always gone through those and made suggestions of changes or answers, things like that. [...] I believe every career counselor knows [them]. [...] [TCSN Network Manager] comes to the school and emails. [TCSN Network Manager] is absolutely my primary contact with TCSN. (GT.21)

The position becomes critical especially when organizational stakeholders in the TCSN go through their own staffing transitions within their organizations. Describing their perception about the manager role, the TCSN Network Manager explained:

And that's the reality of what happens. People change posts, they... our director for the work group lead for the FAFSA, WASFA, [they] also just left [their] position. So I'm not sure who's going to step up and keep the ball rolling. That's where I start to step in and be that glue in the backbone. (GT.25)

Regular meetings of the TCSN also support the work of its organizational stakeholders. The TCSN meets monthly at a standing time and each meeting includes introductions, different presentations relevant to the entire TCSN, and then time (about 20 to 30 minutes) for work groups to meet, plan, and troubleshoot different goals and initiatives. Figure 26 displays an agenda from the May 2019 TCSN meeting. Consistent in format and structure to other CAN meetings, the agenda states objectives on how each portion of time should be used, the designated leaders for each part of the agenda, and incorporates other reminders of due dates and next meetings. Each work group chooses a representative to share results and action items with the rest of the TCSN and the last part of the meeting is saved for general partner announcements.

**Figure 26**

*Example TCSN Network Agenda – May 2019*



**Tacoma College Support Network Meeting**  
May 17, 2019 | 8:30 AM – 10:00 AM  
Foundation for Tacoma Students  
919 S. 9<sup>th</sup> Street Tacoma, WA 98405

**Result:** TCSN Members will hear a presentation from Tacoma Completes and break out into work groups to review 2018-19 strategies and outcomes and prepare EOY reports to inform TCSN strategic planning.

8:30 AM – 8:35 AM	<b>Welcome &amp; Introductions</b>  <b>Result:</b> Members will introduce themselves, sign-in, and provide new contact information.
8:35 AM – 8:55 AM	<b>TCSN Presenter – Tacoma Completes</b>  <b>Result:</b> Members will hear about Tacoma Completes, results from the Berk Scan, and how TCSN partners may support.
8:55 AM – 9:00 AM	<b>TCSN Work Groups End-of-Year Review</b>  <b>Result:</b> Work Groups will use EOY Reporting Template, Work Group Action Plans, and Budget Updates to review & report back to TCSN on past year's strategies & outcomes.
9:00 AM – 9:30 AM	<b>TCSN Work Group Break-out Session</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Middle School Outreach</li> <li>• College Bound Scholar Identity</li> <li>• Paying for College</li> <li>• Completing College</li> <li>• Apprenticeship Pathways</li> <li>• TCSN 101 – New Partners</li> </ul> <b>Result:</b> Work Groups will meet to review current data indicators, revise and implement strategies, work on EOY reports due May 31, and share calls to action for TCSN partners.
9:30 AM – 9:50 AM	<b>Graduate Tacoma Updates</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• STEAM – WSOS Outcomes</li> <li>• Advocacy &amp; Policy Updates and Legislative Wins</li> <li>• Graduate Tacoma Impact Report Forum – Break-out Themes &amp; Notes</li> <li>• ALL CAN Orientation for May – Postponed until Fall</li> <li>• TCSN June 21 Meeting – Last of 2018-19 School Year – Year End Review &amp; Report Outs with Coffee &amp; Donuts.</li> </ul> <b>Result:</b> Members will hear about Graduate Tacoma CAN network initiatives and have a chance to ask questions and give feedback.
9:50 AM – 10:00 AM  TCSN Members	<b>TCSN Strategy &amp; Partner Updates</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner Updates</li> </ul> <b>Result:</b> Members will hear updates on TCSN strategies and events and how to support.

TCSN is dedicated to increasing the number and percentage of Tacoma Public Schools graduates, especially students of color and those impacted by poverty, who enroll in a right-fit college or technical school the year after graduation and who successfully complete a degree or technical certificate.  
[GRADUATETACOMA.ORG/TCSN](http://GRADUATETACOMA.ORG/TCSN)

**Next Meeting: Friday, June 21, 2019, 8:30-10:00 am**

*Note.* Names on agenda masked for confidentiality purposes.

*Source.* Documents provided to author by Graduate Tacoma in 2019

The meeting structure has been developed over time through network learning with the goal of promoting full participation from all organizational members and newcomers. A current TCSN leadership committee member stressed how the agenda encourages “membership voice” and discussion:

We've structured our agendas in ways, like the partner updates that we do in the morning, at the very end. The way that we invite different folks to present the beginning of the meeting. These are all ways that we have tried to make sure that our membership voice is present. We also learned very early on using that NCAN tool ... reflecting back to them, “Here's what we think we heard.” At that point when I was not in my current role, we said, ‘Here's what we're doing moving forward,’ and the coalition said, ‘No you're not.’ (GT.06)

TCSN leadership members also have taken part in “results-based facilitation” training, part of StriveTogether’s national training model that uses the ResultsCount® framework developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). The ResultsCount® framework is a leadership development tool and methodology honed by the Casey Foundation which consists of the “5-2-2” approach – a set of five core competencies (e.g., bring attention to and act on racial disparities, use oneself as an instrument of change), two foundational frameworks (e.g., Theory of Aligned Contributions, Person-Role-System framework), and two foundational skills (e.g., results-based accountability, results-based facilitation) that are meant to help leaders drive results and impact systems change in their communities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

A current Graduate Tacoma employee described their perceptions of the professional development benefits of this meeting structure, explaining:

A common thing I hear from participants who come to our Collaborative Action Network meetings for the first time, they will say things to me like, ‘Holy smokes, that was [...] the most effective meeting I've been at in years.’ Because, again, part of the structure of the model means that the backbone organization basically allows local community to have access to national-level technical assistance skills and capabilities. (GT.14)

Some stakeholders observed that these improvements in facilitation structure helped strengthen collaboration processes around developing more buy-in and deeper engagement among organizational members. One of the TCSN work group leaders noted

how meetings are less members showing up to only share information about their program and more of members contributing to different work group or collaboration goals:

I think in the beginning there were more people that would just kind of come. I would come and say, "Hey, our scholarships have been, see you in a month." Or come whenever there was like an important message from TCC or information to distribute to students. But what I've seen more is that's happening less or people show up just for one thing and then they end up thinking we have committees and like attending that and then seeing that it's actually worth their while to be there to build the relationship. But, yeah, I would say there's a few that come in just to kind of advertise what's going on. But that isn't like too common anymore. A lot more people are coming in actually becoming members and contributing to the collective work. (GT.09)

I observed the ability for the TCSN meetings to keep different organizational partners engaged during the TCSN's January 2019 meeting. Of 25 people in attendance, all were returning participants, but one. With representation across Graduate Tacoma staff, Tacoma Community College and Pacific Lutheran University, TPS, college access nonprofits and a state college access agency, the meeting ran smoothly and followed the agenda and timing allotted for each discussion. Participants seemed clear about the tasks at hand and much of the meeting was devoted to allowing working groups to follow up on their goals and tasks at hand (field notes). In observing the Paying for College and College Bound Student Identity working groups, the discussions and conversations stayed close to the objectives of each group and all work groups had time to share their next steps with the larger group by the end of the meeting (field notes).

### **Organizational missions & purposes**

The content of strategies developed by the TCSN is also shaped by the organizational mission and purposes of stakeholders around the table. Most stakeholders situated their involvement in the TCSN as aligned to the missions of their own



organizations. For example, the early iterations of the TCSN were primarily focused on college access. One stakeholder, working at an organization more focused on college completion, acknowledged challenges of engaging in the early years of the TCSN when the focus was primarily on college awareness and access:

But even there, it was really, I mean, really the activities were pretty exclusively like college awareness, college access, College Bound sign-ups. There was always a group of us whose program work was mostly on the success side once kids were in college, but again, no... we would share about that, but there wasn't any collaboration on it really. (GT.03)

As a larger cross-sector effort, staff at Graduate Tacoma understand that stakeholder organizations are collaborating with several different goals in mind. A Graduate Tacoma staff member described how the work groups are formalized and noted that activities conducted are about “interest convergence” based on organizational strengths:

Yeah, so it's generally a mutually agreed upon interest convergence for these organizations. And then in the summer there's a lot of effort that goes into a strategic planning and how are we going to do this and what are our values and what are the impacts? And then what are the actual practical applications that we can implement in a way that benefit us? GT.04)

Even among stakeholders whose organizations may not have always aligned perfectly with TCSN activities, their reasoning about why they became involved in the collaboration touches on larger missions and visions of their organizations and connections to the mission of TCSN. As a nonprofit organization leader discussed, investing time in the TCSN contributes to taking their mission of generating “homegrown leaders” to scale:

My argument was, I mean, I think we did have a really cohesive sense of let's look at the way for us to accomplish our mission and to take this core idea. I mean, because for us, we're in the college success space. Ultimately, our long-term mission is not about the degree itself, but it's about connected, homegrown

leaders who love their community, who find their way back home. It's a community development strategy that we're really about. When you think about it from that lens, how do we do that on a bigger scale? Or not just us. How can we help that happen? Because we could scale our programs and we're never going to do this work alone. And so, I do think there's a really clear argument to me of why we're investing in this. (GT.03)

A TPS central office administrator positioned partnership in the collaboration as tied to achieving four core goals of the district's strategic plan and its Whole Child Initiative (Tacoma Public Schools, n.d.). This administrator emphasized that "everything can go back to those four goals" in the TPS strategic plan – Academic Excellence, Partnership, Early Learning, and Safety – with Partnership being a key pillar justifying interactions in the TCSN (Tacoma Public Schools, 2020d) (GT.26). As the TPS stakeholder explained:

The first goal is academic achievement. The second goal is partnerships. The third goal is student safety. And the fourth goal... Oh, early childhood learning. Okay? Early learning. So what it ties back to is academic excellence and partnerships, okay? Without even writing up formalized board charts, I can't imagine any administrator that's been in this district for more than a year not understanding that that would be a priority and expectation for administrators, both in the building and central district level, to serve on civic communities, both local, regional, and state. I just I think it's a well-established expectation and culture. Nobody yells at anybody, nobody... because people just step up and do it. (GT.26)

For postsecondary institutions, collaborating on TCSN activities serves more nuanced goals. On one hand, working with the TCSN may not necessarily change overall institutional strategic plans or strategies. A local college stakeholder explained that despite their institution's long collaboration and affiliation with Graduate Tacoma, very little "gets put into our strategic plan necessarily or gets to top leadership in a way that has them thinking, 'Oh, how should we do things differently'" (GT.05). This stakeholder felt institutional leadership was supportive of staff participation in the collaboration, but

ultimately questioned how deeply “invested ...we are as a [Tacoma two-year/career or technical college] into the work.” (GT.05)

Other postsecondary stakeholders were explicit about how being part of the TCSN advanced institutional goals. A representative from a Tacoma two-year institution, for instance, described the benefits that working with the TCSN provides related to their organizational mission of serving Tacoma’s local student body:

I think it's been...our outreach and recruitment person has been part of TCSN for quite a long time. So, I think we really recognized early on the importance of having that connection. And having said that, I also need to acknowledge that higher ed is a competitive business too. And so, there are certainly self-serving reasons for any higher ed institution to be involved with TCSN because you want to make those connections with students early, and you hope they come to your institution. (GT.05)

For a technical college in Tacoma, attracting students immediately after high school is “always” a priority. A representative for the college recognized how the collaboration might help the institution change its image in the community through its work in the TCSN:

That's been a big goal of [Tacoma postsecondary institution] for a long time - is how can we increase students coming directly out of high school? That's a whole other issue at times because that's the way college students are routed into different colleges directly in high school - the message that's being sent to them. We've kind of at some time always been considered an alternative school - technical colleges. So it's finding that rhetoric. How do we make our image different in the eyes of counselors and students? That's also something we're striving for. (GT.13)

### **Fund redistribution and finances among stakeholders**

Another force influencing the content of TCSN’s strategies is how financial resources are distributed by Graduate Tacoma to its CANs and how some organizational stakeholders garner new financial resources for their organizations to further support the goals of the TCSN. Each CAN decides how they want to structure the CAN, whether

they need to implement strategies requiring fiscal support from Graduate Tacoma and are given autonomy in how to spend any funds available. According to a Graduate Tacoma staff member, CAN budgets vary between \$30,000 to \$70,000 (GT.25, personal communication, February 27, 2021). The process to receive funds might look different across CANs depending on their strategic goal. For the TCSN, the Network Manager emphasized the collaborative planning among work group members to decide what to budget to enact their goals:

In the TCSN specifically, we haven't done a lot of that kind of granting out yet, but what we have done in the last two years is actually we have had a budget, and what I do is, I actually create--we have five groups right now in TCSN, and those were all decided upon based on the partners in the group and what they wanted to focus in terms of strategies. And then those partners came up with Action Plans where they said, and they created their own budgets, so they basically said, 'This is what we think we need to do this year, and this is how much money we think it's going to cost.' (GT.25)

Efforts to systematize the action plan and budgeting process for the TCSN are evolving. In 2018-19 TCSN Action Plans shared by Graduate Tacoma, not all work groups had a determined budget for the year and funding requests varied considerably. For example, the Completing College work group budgeted \$10,000 for the What's Next event. The Middle School Outreach work group budgeted \$5,000, considered a "very small scale" endeavor by the TCSN Network Manager to provide incentives for students signing up for the College Bound Scholarship, transportation, and interpreters for parents at College Bound events (GT.25). In total, TCSN work groups budgeted \$30,000 for their different strategies in 2018-19. Other supporting strategies led within Graduate Tacoma such as annual mailers to students for FAFSA/WASFA completion and other college-going information were budgeted at \$38,000, making \$68,000 the total requested budget for the TCSN in 2018-19. These budgets and strategies were reviewed and approved by

the TCSN Leadership Committee, and then approved by administrators from within Graduate Tacoma (GT.25, personal communication, February 27, 2021). A TCSN member described the process at this time as “not very structured” and that once budget items were approved, TCSN members would work with the Network Manager to figure out “who to bill or reimburse, depending on which organization covered the cost of the item” (GT.01, personal communication, March 7, 2021).

While Graduate Tacoma as the backbone organization can cover nominal expenses for collaborative activities, collaborating partners are asked to help sponsor or fund large events, like College Bound Saturday. Organizational stakeholders noted their individual efforts to secure financial resources, or provide staff time and space, to support TCSN strategies. Discussing the FAFSA completion event planned by the TCSN Paying for College work group for multiple sites on one day, a nonprofit program manager described cost-sharing across collaborating organizations:

Everyone’s pretty much chipping in. It's still very volunteer based and people are kind of using their connections. So for example, [Tacoma college access nonprofit] is hosting. We're going to be one of the sites. Typically, we would rent out our space and that would create a cost. However, because of my connection with TCSN, I could rent out the space for free and just turn it into an event. So, our high school staff, who already does this for our students, is going to be hosting this for the city. (GT.17)

Another TCSN member working in federal TRIO programs in Tacoma through TCC reflected how potential for funding also continues to encourage engagement in the collaboration:

So I think a lot of the collaboration and what we're doing is being promoted and seen as a good thing. So that's helping get funding for a lot of the things that we're trying to push forward, like the FAFSA and WASFA, increasing the percentages of students that are completing that and things like that. (GT.23)

This stakeholder felt that TCSN funding through Graduate Tacoma was aligned to “all three areas that my program works for as well.” In other words, organizational stakeholders perceived that funding for TCSN’s strategies helped organizational priorities, such as improving FAFSA completion rates.

Several stakeholders discussed how the TCSN acted as a forum to discuss and brainstorm ideas for which their organizations later received funding. For example, a TCC administrator credited applying for a grant called Core to College from College Spark Washington based on discussions within TCSN about addressing academic curriculum gaps between high school and college. They emphasized how idea-sharing in the TCSN helped develop new programming at the institution:

And I can tell you another grant that I co-wrote with our grants person and it was called Core to College. And the idea of that really did come out of being at TCSN, and thinking, and learning more about the TCC, the TPS students who came to TCC, and we were looking at their assessment results. So, we at the time were using Accuplacer pretty significantly, and the students were not doing very well. They weren't, you know, assessing very close to college level. And so I really felt like there was this big disconnect between curriculums in K-12 and higher ed. And because those faculty don't talk to each other, what was considered high school graduation-proficient and college entry profession didn't really match. So, we did get a College Spark Grant for \$150,000 for three years. And the whole point of that was to get high school and college faculty in the Math and English disciplines together. (GT.05)

The TCC administrator additionally linked this work to more recent smaller grants to further align curriculum between college Math faculty and high school Math faculty in their Bridge to College courses, the developmental education courses that are offered to students who have lower test scores on the statewide Smarter Balanced Assessment.

Being part of the TCSN has given some outsized benefits to one organization in particular, Degrees of Change. Degrees of Change worked collaboratively with Graduate Tacoma to secure and lead efforts for the StriveTogether Opportunity Fund grant, which

was foundational to creating Tacoma Completes. Degrees of Change runs two other programs locally and nationally focused on college completion: Act Six and Ready to Rise. Act Six is a cohort-based leadership development program also providing full tuition scholarships to “diverse emerging leaders as they earn their degrees at private liberal arts colleges and return home as leaders in their communities” (Degrees of Change, 2019). With another College Spark Washington grant, Degrees of Change later launched Ready to Rise, a related program that extended their work to public two-year and four-year institutions in Tacoma and across sites in Washington (without scholarships) further refining their college persistence and completion strategies via leadership development and through cohort-based programming. A UWT administrator perceived that these other programs for Degrees of Change have benefitted from TCSN involvement as a space for brainstorming that eventually led to their organizational expansions:

Certainly, the Ready to Rise Program came out of TCSN and so that was with the Degrees of Change through their Act Six scholarship. With it, it was kind of incubated within TCSN with some cohort building work that they did at TCC. When they got this College Spark grant, they really worked with myself and my counter, [UWT employee], another partner at TCC to think about what that partnership looks like. (GT.06)

With Degrees of Change staff members taking roles on the TCSN Leadership Committee and in leading the Paying for College and Completing College work groups, the organization also contributes to building TCSN’s postsecondary completion efforts. With the availability of the Opportunity Fund grant, a Graduate Tacoma staff member discussed the need to leverage expertise within the TCSN to ultimately make headway on completion goals and strategies. They specifically described the organizational expertise of Degrees for Change to support this work:

And then the other piece, Degrees of Change were leading this a little bit more and they're also leading the completion work, and that's an example, too, where we've got this big Strive work, Strive grant for completion and then we passed it through to a partner that's leading that work. Their expertise is on the ground level of completion. That's not our expertise. We're cradle to career backbone. So we don't have that depth of expertise in each of those areas. (GT.25)

A leader in Degrees of Change also recognized their shared role in Graduate Tacoma's desires to address postsecondary enrollment and completion. Through the Opportunity Fund grant, for which Graduate Tacoma applied for and Degrees of Change is now implementing, this leader attributed the evolving effort to a recognition from the wider movement about the need to improve enrollment and completion:

Then the last piece, I think, would be with this investment of StriveTogether money that's just come in that has been now given a name, this idea of Tacoma Completes, which is, I think, Graduate Tacoma recognizing that, "Wow. The high school graduation rate has gone really, fantastically through the roof. The college going and college completing rates have been year-to-year variation without any real trend up. If anything, a slight trend down as we've graduated more kids, but not as many have gone to college. (GT.03)

Another Tacoma Completes representative also credited the emergence of Tacoma Completes to the existence of Graduate Tacoma, saying:

Just because it's top of mind, I have a very specific thing that is definitely being influenced, it [Tacoma Completes] wouldn't be on our radar at all if Graduate Tacoma didn't exist[...] So, which all to say what's been changed with us is that we, just even in the last month, have, even the last week, have become much more alert to and starting to go to meetings with and talk about where is the intersection between housing and persistence and how can we strengthen that. (GT.01)

Positioned organizationally as a program within Degrees of Change, Tacoma Completes is an example of how membership in the TCSN helped Degrees of Change to garner more funding while also fulfilling network goals. In a written statement, Graduate Tacoma's executive director labeled Tacoma Completes as a partnership with Degrees of Change and Graduate Tacoma, mentioning the "leadership of Degrees of Change," as



well as the “critical pillar” of the TCSN “to allow us enhance and accelerate our work towards a Tacoma where every child succeeds in school, career and life” (Ervin, 2019).

### **Process conditions shaping TCSN’s postsecondary-related efforts (RQ3)**

Several forces shape how TCSN’s postsecondary-related strategies are being implemented in hopes of improving community-level educational outcomes. First, how the TCSN navigates organizational relationships through various tensions, especially in its relationship maintenance with TPS and with other external stakeholders, contributes to its ability to work effectively and shape program delivery to improve postsecondary-related outcomes. Second, data practices within the TCSN and across Graduate Tacoma have helped spur shared understanding of the progress being made toward influencing community-level education outcomes. Third, the extent to which the collaboration engages in conversations around educational equity may also moderate the ability for the TCSN to fully address educational equity concerns in educational outcomes.

#### **Relationship management to inform programs and policies**

Sustaining relationships across different organizational and institutional interests in the TCSN is fundamental to executing strategies to improve postsecondary outcomes in Tacoma. To implement the collaboration, organizational partners need to work through different tensions and conflicts that arise in maintaining relationships and still see benefits and advantages to working in collaboration. After overviewing main tensions discussed by stakeholders in the collaboration, this section describes how the TCSN navigates two fundamental collaborative relationships - those it manages with TPS and those among other stakeholders including postsecondary institutions, nonprofits, and other service providers.

### *Challenges or tensions in managing relationships*

Several stakeholders discussed that one central tension navigated across Graduate Tacoma is how the collaboration has given credit to different community partners, and in particular, the TPS, for marked improvements in high school graduation rates. In the earlier days of partnership, during a strategic planning process for TPS, one city representative and former TPS school board member recalled that Tacoma 360 took a more active role than Foundation for Tacoma Schools in contributing to the process. In their view, the Foundation for Tacoma Schools “had different goals than we did” (GT.20). This city representative described frustration over more overt credit-taking by Foundation for Tacoma Schools at that time, explaining:

They just kind of made some decisions about what would be right for Tacoma. And, then when TPS, this is from my perspective and I am not alone in this at all, anytime TPS had a success, Graduate Tacoma would be like, ‘Look we did it.’ (GT.20).

Another nonprofit organizational stakeholder with the College Success Foundation, which helped spearhead much of the early TCSN activities for the College Bound Scholarship, also discussed how Graduate Tacoma at times neglected to credit staff in partnering organizations doing the work of the collaboration. They explained that the community-wide movement can sometimes be perceived as overshadowing the day-to-day direct service work of their staff to help achieve graduation results:

The challenges that I get externally often is people feel that Graduate Tacoma takes too much credit for the work that College Success Foundation is doing. And they're saying, ‘Graduate Tacoma's kind of this movement, but we actually have our staff in the schools that are doing the workday in and day out providing the direct services and we're the ones that had those 250 high school seniors last year in Tacoma that graduated and helped move that metric of higher graduation.’ (GT.07)

While these perceptions focus on Graduate Tacoma, such impressions also transferred to the TCSN's role in the community. One TCSN member stated bluntly that the TCSN "in the past had kind of this reputation of taking other people's ideas and best practices and then celebrating them as their own, but not giving credit where it was due." (GT.09)

Another point of tension among collaboration partners was a perceived lack of transparency in how Graduate Tacoma utilizes finances to support work in the CANs. Several nonprofit TCSN stakeholders discussed a lack of clarity in how Graduate Tacoma makes decisions about its financial resources. One nonprofit organizational leader described the, at times, "opaque" process for how Graduate Tacoma provided money for TCSN work group activities:

I was just at the leadership team meeting. They have made a budget available to these working groups around different projects and those groups can ask for a budget. I'm part of that leadership team, but also part of the What's Next working group. So we asked for \$10,000 to help with that event, which is cool, and we got it. I mean, they said, 'Sure.' But we have no idea where that money comes from. And is that a little? Is that a lot? It's interesting. We're trying to just encourage them, and they're making really good strides. Okay. Now, there's a way to ask to apply for, but if this is really a community, I think there's a level we could be more transparent on just how those decisions get made. It still feels kind of opaque in places. I know that that's shared among others. It's pretty frequently talked about like, 'I don't know,' or the eye roll, 'I have no idea how that got decided, but okay. Here we go.' (GT.03)

Another TCSN stakeholder speculated that this lack of clarity could be a "point of tension" for smaller organizations that may not have the capacity to lead or collaborate on grants:

But that's one of the places where I feel like it's a point of tension for other organizations because then you have some of the smaller organizations around the table like, 'Well, when did you guys decide to collaborate or go in on this grant? How did you have this money? Why don't we have access?' And then that trust starts building and it's like, 'Well, did you use our best practices? And what we shared with you to get that money that you're not sharing with us?' (GT.09)

A TCSN leadership committee member speculated on how TPS practitioners might react to this perceived lack of clarity. According to them, district staff and others “in the trenches” may feel confusion about Graduate Tacoma’s role in attracting funding and what that funding is used for:

I think from that perspective, I think there's a "Hmm." Because I think there's, if I had to read between the lines and the nuance that I get from them, it's like, ‘Yeah, our staff, and our work, and our district is doing the hard work to drive this.’ Graduate Tacoma attracts resources, but nobody quite knows what they do with those. I mean, no one came out and said it quite like that, but I think there is a sense. (GT.03)

Several stakeholders acknowledged that committing to be in partnership with the TCSN also requires a substantial time investment – a potential tension when trying to prioritize goals of the collaboration with individual organizational needs. As a nonprofit manager in the TCSN discussed, one main cost of collaborating is directly related to conducting work outside of their job descriptions:

Time is definitely a big chunk of that. Because this is not part of our ... it's outside of our job descriptions. So participation and the TCSN efforts and actually all the branch effort are outside of what we're supposed to do. (GT.17)

A postsecondary institutional stakeholder and TCSN Leadership Committee member provided a frank assessment of time involved on TCSN activities and emphasized the need to be strategic in how to manage their programs with the time commitment:

I joke that Graduate Tacoma is my second office, and I've had to be really careful because I could spend my entire job over there. It could suck up all of my time, and I have to be really careful and thoughtful. (GT.06)

Committing time to show up to meetings and implement activities may also be particularly difficult for TPS school personnel in building relationships with the TCSN. A TPS high school administrator emphasized the difficulty in being able to leave their school building, not because of a lack of desire to be involved:

I would say that each one [high school] is probably very different. As far as like being involved in TCSN or attending meetings and participating - just maybe like one or two other high schools that are there on a kind of consistent basis. Which is really hard. I got to be honest with you, it's really hard to leave my building. It's a test especially in the day, it's like the worst time ever. I do need to say that but I don't think it's about people's desire to do it. (GT.18)

A TPS college and career counselor echoed the challenges of leaving their school to attend TCSN meetings, stating, “TCSN has been around a long time and I no longer go to the meetings because I really don't think I can be away from school with that.” (GT.21) For them, not being able to engage more deeply in resources and partnerships like the TCSN was a source of frustration. Describing how much of their time was “booked in other ways” (e.g., SAT and PSAT coordinator, High School and Beyond plan completion, data entry), the college and career counselor felt that they “don’t spend nearly as much time individually with students as I’d like” and that “it’s not what I would choose to have it be.” (GT.21) Noting their interest but lack of capacity, the TPS college and career counselor stated:

And then if we had a full advisory system, I think there would be, we could make much more out of ideas and resources that might come from, for example, TCSN. (GT.21)

### *Managing relationships with Tacoma Public Schools*

As the core direct provider of educational services for Tacoma’s children, the TPS needs to play a central role in activities within Graduate Tacoma to improve Tacoma’s educational outcomes. Organizationally, TPS’ central administrative staff are engaged at a variety of different levels within the TCSN and in Graduate Tacoma, signifying recognition and dedication overall to the citywide collaboration. The TCSN requires that, of two co-leaders on the TCSN Leadership Committee, one representative must be from the TPS (GT.01, personal communication, March 7, 2021). There is also

some limited representation at TCSN meetings from various in-school TPS staff. At least one to two TPS central staff sit on Leadership Committees of other CANs, except for Out of School and Summer Learning (Graduate Tacoma, 2020d). The TPS superintendent, Carla Santorno, was and continues to be a board member for the Foundation for Tacoma Students (Graduate Tacoma, 2020c).

The relationship between the district and Graduate Tacoma is also generally characterized by TPS and other external stakeholders as “symbiotic.” One building block of this relationship is how TCSN stakeholders acknowledge the important role of the school district in their efforts to produce meaningful educational change, addressing earlier perceptions that Graduate Tacoma did not give enough credit to the district for its work. District stakeholders generally emphasized the importance of district leadership and district strategies in creating the foundations for school improvements. An administrator from the TPS central office attributed much of the improvements in high school graduation to the “relentless” dedication of school district leadership, describing the hard work and focus within the TPS to raise high school graduation rates, saying:

The Board, and the administration went to work on it, and used everything they could to do it. The community partners, every tool or device, for the policy, removing every barrier, providing every opportunity. (GT.26)

An employee at a Tacoma public high school believed that momentum to improve graduation in the city was spearheaded by the district. For them, the district’s Whole Child Initiative and positive behavioral institutional supports (PBIS) practices generated the greatest district improvements, which contributes to the wider Graduate Tacoma movement:

To me, that's what has made the biggest difference. And I think it's made the biggest difference here at [public high school in Tacoma]. The district played a

huge role in supporting that, right? We would not have been able to do that as effectively as we'd done it, if they have not supported those things. That is part of Graduate Tacoma. But I do see overall the district's push for, 'This is not where we want to be. Here are the ways that we're going to address it, right? We're going to do things like PBIS, Whole Child and want to do things like, form this coalition to kind of figure out what's going on. (GT.18)

Acknowledging these successes, TPS and other nonprofit TCSN stakeholders pointed to ways that Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN elevated or reinforced those important district practices. A nonprofit organizational leader in the TCSN gave TPS most credit for its work to improve educational outcomes for Tacoma students, but also noted Graduate Tacoma's role as a "megaphone" for those achievements:

I would describe Graduate Tacoma and the school district as having a [...] like a symbiotic relationship, right? I mean, I think the district does most of the work. I think the Graduate Tacoma is their megaphone, gives them - garnished a lot of credit back and attention back to the district. They're like the PR of that. And again, I mean, I think all the ways that communities are supporting that. Graduate Tacoma's played a really important role. I don't want to diminish that, but I don't think that the storyline there is like, 'Look, all these community partners have helped, have found the kids and...' It's the school district. (GT.03)

A TPS administrator also recognized how conversations in the TCSN helped to focus and build a "critical mass" for influencing other district initiatives. In discussing early conversations in the TCSN to help think through TPS' eventual Algebra for All initiative, requiring that all 8<sup>th</sup> graders must take Algebra I, this administrator recollected that:

Probably about 2010, 2011...TCSN was involved in the conversations, different partners, and that probably helped communicate an expectation that our school board would take the risk publicly to accept...it wasn't a written policy, but the initiative was every...Algebra for All. And so Algebra became the math standard in Tacoma Public Schools for all eighth graders. So that was a big one for us. I know other districts that did it before us and after us. But TCSN, I do remember that conversation quite a bit around the tables. I think part of what the TCSN can do... it's kind of like if you talk about the collective impact... is to help build a critical mass. (GT.26)

Even more forcefully, this district administrator also discussed how the College Bound Scholarship sign-up work between the district and TCSN helped solidify a “college-going culture in the district:”

The College Bound Scholars initiative helped further develop the college-going culture in the district. And so when you ask the question about... You know? Who did the work, or how? Yeah. I think the TCSN partners really contributed. Because all of a sudden everybody was talking about postsecondary education, or the military, or apprenticeship. It wasn't just four-year colleges. And so in the community, the buzz was that Tacoma kids go to college. (GT.26)

Despite acknowledging the shared contributions of working together, the TCSN’s ability to influence activities in the TPS for promoting improved educational outcomes is limited. The TCSN and TPS have open lines of communication, which helps the TCSN align its goals to district needs. The TCSN Network Manager explained how current conversations with the district are meant to clarify strategies and supports among their network:

We’re testing also right now with the district about having an embedded college access person within the district, about how we can better align within this large district, the work that's going on. We're right in the early stages also of, they want to know, "Well what is TCSN already doing? What efforts are you supporting?" And we've sent them, "What is your timeline?" And they're thinking about, if we do better at creating a system around this, how would we start to have that system? How do we systematize it more in our large district? (GT.25)

The Network Manager qualified the relationship with the TPS, also stating, there is “good communication” between TPS and TCSN and that “they do listen to us.” (GT.25)

Other TCSN stakeholders perceived that even while there is district leadership buy-in, the role of the TPS in the TCSN is less consistent than in the past. A college access nonprofit leader observed more district engagement for larger public Graduate Tacoma events than in everyday TCSN activities:



But there are intersections where other levels of Tacoma Public Schools are involved. So when I say other levels, when we have an Impact Report out, then I see more school district people involved in that kind of activity. And I also see the superintendent is on the board and I think that she is... she reads the Impact Report. Yeah. Pertinent questions, so she's involved, but I don't think it enjoys... TCSN does not enjoy the same level of school district personnel participation as it once enjoyed. Maybe it spread out among all end camps, I don't know. (GT.16)

The TCSN Network Manager also acknowledged different levels of engagement of the TPS, but emphasized issues of resources and capacity over lack of desire to commit to TCSN's work:

That leadership, though, has come and gone. The schools have always made a commitment to have somebody from their leadership on the committee, but who they've assigned to that position has changed, and that has affected their capacity. They've also gone through some huge budget cuts just recently. Despite these budget cuts, there remains the commitment to this collaborative partnership centered on supporting students. Despite lean budget years, we creatively find ways to make it work together. (GT.25)

Suggesting other limits to TCSN's work, Graduate Tacoma activities do not seem to be prioritized in the information that gets communicated to school administration. One TPS school leader discussed that TPS and TCSN work together, but that information is "not always coming to me directly" (GT.18). This same school leader distinguished that meetings where Graduate Tacoma information would be shared among counseling staff typically are "more detail-oriented rather than like change-oriented" (GT.18). As they continued to explain, "We don't have really a system in place of kind of looking at systems and looking at that kind of stuff, I guess." (GT.18).

Tacoma school personnel may also be demonstrating discretion in which activities they promote to students. For instance, the Tacoma school leader mentioned that their high school communicates information via robocalls to students about information nights,

FAFSA nights, and the like. But when asked about a signature TCSN event – College Bound Saturday – the administrator conceded:

For College Bound Saturday we don't ever send out for, because again, we don't know who is eligible. That was an interesting thing, I guess. It's been kind of poorly attended the last couple of years because it's hard for the high school to identify who they would need to reach out to. We really haven't been reaching out to them because I don't know who to reach out to. (GT.18)

Still, approaches by the TCSN are seen in a positive light by district and TCSN stakeholders, suggesting an openness to continue working together. A central staff member within TPS (GT.26) credited TCSN's Network Manager for being a good communicator and partner for information and resources, referring particularly to consolidating information on FAFSA nights and College Bound Saturday. They credited the Network Manager for "keeping the conversation live" in a "nice way" as more of a "help and support," to ensure career guidance specialists are kept abreast of activities. Another TPS school leader also communicated appreciation for the TCSN's effort to hold a listening tour to learn from different staff for how TCSN can best support their work. But this school leader also questioned whether their attendance at meetings would actually translate into different practices:

So kind of, how can we communicate with the school a little bit better without ... What I appreciated about them is they're always like, "We don't have to put more on the school than we have, right?" Our plates are very full and I appreciate that they know that our plates are very full. It's really important. More importantly, my counselors, my teachers their plates are super full. I think they're [TCSN] on their way to figuring out, how they're going to take the information and get it more effectively to those people who need it at the building level. I think they're doing a good job communicating with each other. The next step would be how are we going to get it? Really get it to the building level? Because just me going to a meeting, it's probably ... That's a good strategy always. I don't always tell the people I need to tell or whatever. (GT.18)

Difficulties in shaping “building level” strategies for high schools suggest the limits of efforts between TCSN and TPS to directly impact high school practices despite positive organizational relationships and impressions maintained between groups in promoting postsecondary readiness and success.

*Managing relationships with other external stakeholders*

Managing relationships to shape other new policies or practices with other external stakeholders beyond the TPS may be more of a core priority for the TCSN. A Graduate Tacoma staff member explained that one “key hinge point” or “challenge” of their work as a backbone agency is “leaning out to the actual folks who work with the students outside of the schools” (GT. 14). This staff member explained that efforts to organize groups external to the school district are meant to remove the level of competition among such groups:

And I think, in fairness, when we began organizing these groups, they were in a competitive, scarcity framework. And it was through a cautious and trust-building period of time that they began to realize that it wasn't a competitive zero-sum game of everybody fighting over six pieces of pizza. It was a much more co-opative... You know, I like the word co-opatition. And you know, they still are kind of competing to deliver good services and in some cases their services overlap, but when they work together, they make the pizza bigger. (GT.14)

Attracting more financial resources helps Graduate Tacoma develop relationships in supporting organizations while potentially minimizing competition for resources among organizational stakeholders. A Graduate Tacoma staffer described that the 2019 gift from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was meant to “help alleviate the competition between us and our partners for those dollars.” (GT.25) This staff member explained how new funding is intended to help Graduate Tacoma scale up the work of other organizations:

But now, what we're doing is, because we got this large grant, which is in a very, two-year time frame, we're going ... one of the features of that grant is called capability and capacity building. We're actually looking at partners that are, how can they maybe scale up the work that they're really doing that are matching and meeting our indicators. So we're in the process right now, very quickly developing those, a whole panel that's going to be an advisory board for that, and a rubric, and application process. (GT.25)

Collaborating on funding across partners involves some noted growing pains. As a Graduate Tacoma staff member explains, deciding how to use new funds to “build the capacity” of partners is a novel role for them to take but ultimately is meant to support work that is common across organizations:

But this is all very new to us and under a quick time frame. But, anyway, that hasn't traditionally been our role, and won't necessarily always be our role. Traditionally, our role has not been as a direct funder. If there is a way to build the capacity of our partners, to amplify our collective outcomes, and we are attracting dollars because of that, that is the power of our collective partnerships at work. We are not just keeping those dollars to ourselves. Those funds are going to support and grow what is working in common to serve our students and families. (GT.25)

One staff member familiar with Graduate Tacoma's fund development suggested that the work of Graduate Tacoma is also beginning to meet their intent for managing financial resources as well – to influence strategies among funders for how they support organizational stakeholders. Describing discussions with a program officer for one local foundation, the stakeholder explained how being a partner in the Graduate Tacoma is considered a requirement to obtain new funds:

They just kind of casually mentioned that one of the things that kind of makes or breaks it for their investments into organizations in Tacoma is where or not the community partner that they're considering an investment into is part of the Graduate Tacoma movement or not...because if they're not part of the movement, they don't want to invest in them.” (GT.14)

Members of the TCSN also try to keep relationships alive and re-engage partners that have for various reasons stepped away from the collaboration. One Tacoma Housing

Authority staffer explained that “because we are partners with Graduate Tacoma, we want to support their work in any way that we can” (GT.12), but that involvement changes across the CANs. While current staff members from THA are represented on the STEAM and Early Learning CANs, this staffer noted:

We have been represented there. I'm going to say I don't know if we currently do. I know that there was a gentleman who was in our policy department, who sat on the College Support Network, but I don't know if his replacement goes. (GT.12)

In these cases, as described by a TCSN Leadership Committee member, even as organizational engagement might ebb and flow, TCSN leaders look for opportunities to re-engage partners:

I'm going to think about that. I don't always know why people drift away or why they come back. I know that often staff transitions are involved. For example, we have the Tacoma Housing Authority, which has a College Savings Account program as a local housing community and they were coming to TCSN for a while and then they weren't. Then I learned recently that they have new staff that are in place, so I re-invited them to come back to the table. (GT.06)

This TCSN leader also noted that re-engagement occurs as activities in the network change. Referring to a local college access nonprofit, Palmer Scholars, which had a new leader start in Fall 2018 and typically just one staff member involved (GT.10), this stakeholder described that now that postsecondary completion is a focus in the TCSN, they have re-engaged:

Other times, definitely folks like Palmer Scholars who I think again, a lot of staff transition and a lot of change in leadership there. But they definitely were very active early on and then stepped away because there wasn't a lot of focus on college completion which is really where their organization is. But, as we've brought that back into focus for the network, now they're back and they are re-engaged. (GT.06)

From a Graduate Tacoma staff perspective, differences in staff involvement are expected and understandable. The TCSN Network Manager described that staff capacity

issues at one postsecondary institution contributed to the institution's absences in the collaboration even though they "buy into what we're doing:"

When there are big crises or changes that go on in an organization, obviously then they pull back. They've got to just survive on the most basic priority level. I would say that also happened a bit with the community college and it's currently happening with [Tacoma technical college]. They lost some of their staffing. They used to have several people [...] So the capacity for that partner to be at the table even though they're very and completely buy into what we're doing, they just haven't been coming and then therefore are out of the loop. (GT.25).

The TCSN's collaboration has also deepened relationships among partners outside the school district, and these relationships may help to sustain membership at meetings and plan collaborative events. Acknowledging that sometimes "progress is very slow," a TCSN stakeholder described more hopefully that learning from partners in collaboration is one benefit to working together:

I mean, this isn't necessarily from my perspective. I try to very much go into a situation with an open mind and try and just take what I can learn from it, but I will say that I have heard from different people a little bit of skepticism sometimes around what TCSN does. I think feeling like, 'Oh, you go to this meeting once per month. Does anything actually come out of it?' I think that, that's maybe just half-glass-empty people not realizing like, 'Oh, there's all these opportunities for collaboration and finding out about things that are going on that you didn't know about.' But it can feel a little bit like progress is very slow when you have all these people who come together, but really, they have their own 40-hour week jobs. (GT.10)

Organizational stakeholders spoke to how connections across different initiatives are a "big advantage" (GT.05) to their own efforts and that finding relationships through TCSN "establishes credibility in this community" (GT.06). Even when partners experience the fatigue of monthly meetings and time commitments to the collaboration, multiple nonprofit and postsecondary institutional stakeholders reiterated how being able to connect, even if briefly at meetings, with other stakeholders around common causes informs "the decisions you're making and what you're doing" (GT.10). A postsecondary

institutional stakeholder spoke to the personal investment they felt in collaborating when asked whether drawbacks exist in participating in the collaboration:

No. That's my short answer. I guess what I'll say about that is, it's always a struggle. I mean I got a lot of jobs. I manage a lot of business aspects of the college. I didn't lose any of those when I took this on, but I'm also a Tacoma boy. So, I care a lot about this. I put in a lot of time and effort at it, because I do care about it. I think the only drawback, as I would do it, is balancing. And this is true, I think, of everybody who's in this collaboration. They've all got primary missions that they're involved in. So, it's balancing executing what you need to do with your own organization and your responsibilities with the investment of time it takes to do this. But, if you don't invest the time, it ain't going to happen. (GT.02)

Nonprofit stakeholders especially seem to benefit from the relationships and information provided through TCSN membership. A program manager at a smaller nonprofit explained that meeting interactions ensure that stakeholders better understand the thought processes of partners and their strategies:

I mean, I would say that's the highest level of collaboration that, I would say, has come out of that is, out of being a part of TCSN is being able to ... I mean, again, I'm just kind of the starting phases of being involved in that also, specifically involved in that work group. But being able to collaborate with other people from other organizations and other universities, and find out where their heads are at, and what their goals are. I mean, because ultimately, there's a bigger vision here than just, "Oh, we want to make sure that our students have opportunities." It's not just about our students. Ultimately, our vision is transforming Pierce County. Not just trying to be small peanuts with our little organization. (GT.10)

Another nonprofit college access program manager described that engagement with other community partners helps prioritize those commitments to partners and follow through on plans:

Yeah, I think the biggest, and I don't want to underplay this, the biggest thing really is maintaining those relationships with those community partners. Because we have all worked together in one capacity or another, but it's almost like we can sometimes forget that we can do that again. So, we could have an annual sustained partnership with UWT or Bates or any other organization. And then our daily lives just get too busy to really formulate that. So, these meetings are really a constant reminder of, 'All right, let's get this together. Let's get it on the books.

Let's meet after this meeting and grab coffee. Let's talk about how we can have a field trip and you could show us around campus.' (GT.17)

Building these relationships may help other college access service providers work across programs within TPS. A nonprofit college access program manager noted that there is now "less competition" in schools where several programs may be serving the same students:

And because of the coalition, because we work closely together and there's less competition at my Program Manager level there's less therefore that trickles down to less competition at school level. We really work to be cooperative in our resources versus competitive. An example is, sometimes in the past, at [a Tacoma middle school], where there's been three or four of these programs, there's been a lot of vying of who gets which students and who gets better room and things like that. I really haven't seen that happen for the last five years, right? There's no backstabbing or like, 'We should get preferential treatment in this school.' It's the opposite of that which is, 'Let's support each other's students.' (GT.16)

A different nonprofit stakeholder discussed how the quality of relationships built among TCSN members facilitate having "tough conversations" with each other about planning future strategies in the TCSN, stating:

No, it's within the kind of three work groups that I participate in, I'm pretty vocal about it. And I have a lot of people that agree with me and then there's others that are just like, 'Well, we just have to get through this year and figure it out next year.' And I said, "Well, we really have to quit doing that," because we get through this year that ends in the spring. We don't need all summer. And then the excuse every fall is, 'Oh, well, it's a school year. We have to get through this year. And if we don't take time to, maybe we should meet over the summer then, maybe?' Maybe that's the... we have good enough relationships though to have those tough conversations. And one of the things that came from that is we're no longer doing a College Bound Saturday. (GT.09)

For postsecondary institutional stakeholders, maintaining relationships in the collaboration is also worth the time commitment as it helps them better understand local conditions and recruit the area's students. Being part of the network, according to a local



postsecondary representative, has allowed their institution to respond to environments in flux:

I have been involved with this network for so long that then sometimes you think what is the purpose of being here? This isn't working, it isn't bringing in a return investment of my time. But the thing is that I have to really keep in mind and the college too, that there's always something new. Labor, the market changes, so it shifts just all the time. And we need to be cognizant of that because no creative strategy or vision is going to fix everything. We always have to reinvent the wheel or just create new things, and in order to do that we cannot do it ourselves. We just have to have a lot of partnerships. (GT.11)

Being part of the collaboration has also helped postsecondary partners learn how to better serve students. One postsecondary institutional stakeholder felt the collaboration helped them better understand the students they were recruiting:

You got the insight to who the students you are serving are. There are certainly diverse population and I think when you're at Graduate Tacoma, you get to hear different approaches to reaching different populations of students. I think that would probably be the most beneficial thing that Graduate Tacoma has done into diverse group of people, so you're really getting to look through different lenses and you're hearing what's working and what's not working because you have to take different approaches to reach different students depending on who they are, what's their background, and where they're coming from. Are they low income? There's just a lot of different things that go into recruiting and that's been really beneficial. (GT.13)

Other organizations indicate rethinking and reevaluating how their services may connect with activities of the collaboration to serve students more effectively as well. The Tacoma Housing Authority, for example, offers a range of educational programming across K-12 grades. A THA stakeholder discussed that Graduate Tacoma's influence over the broader planning for K-12 and postsecondary activities:

We're figuring that out now, and more and it's also us going out and asking our partners. We've had this conversation with folks at Graduate Tacoma too - of like really where should THA plug itself in the broader community's efforts around either high school graduation and college enrollment and persistence. (GT.15)

One program that THA is reconsidering is the Children's Saving Account (CSA) program. THA began the CSA Program in September 2015 to "encourage students to aspire to continue their education or training after high school, help them prepare for it, and help their families pay for it" (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2015). Starting in kindergarten, students who either live in the New Salishan property or enroll at Lister Elementary receive a savings account opened in their name with a \$50 deposit made by THA. For each year until 5<sup>th</sup> grade, THA matches family deposits to the account up to \$400 per year. When students begin 6<sup>th</sup> grade, all New Salishan residents entering First Creek Middle School are eligible. Students can join a cohort at any time they become eligible. For instance, students who move into the New Salishan residences in first grade can join the cohort that were in kindergarten one year prior (Galvez et al., 2017). THA stops matches in middle school but hires a counselor to help plan different milestones (e.g., improved attendance, improved GPA, taking the PSAT, SAT, ACT) for the student's education until high school graduation and college enrollment. When students reach each milestone, THA deposits up to \$700 per year into the student's account (Tacoma Housing Authority, 2015). A THA representative suggested that involvement with Graduate Tacoma is helping shape its role in providing educational supports and in the future development of the CSA:

But in terms of kind of like where do we seamlessly play a role in the whole pipeline of K12 and post-secondary, hence our redesign, we're figuring that out now. It's also us going out and asking our partners. We've had this conversation with folks at Graduate Tacoma too of like, 'Really where should THA plug itself in the broader community's efforts around either high school graduation and college enrollment and persistence?' And more and more, we find ourselves in this particular position to pivot the CSA program so that it is more seamlessly integrated into an existing thing, and not just kind of us trying to plug and play just based off of assuming that this is the right thing to do. (GT.15)

Similar considerations are happening in the THA with the emergence of Tacoma Completes and the College Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) run by the THA. A THA representative described how conversations with Graduate Tacoma partners are also helping the align strategies for the CHAP:

I think primarily for right now, we are understanding that there's a strong pivot by the Graduate Tacoma movement to really focus on that college enrollment and retention piece. And so we have had a couple of conversations with folks from Degrees of Change and Graduate Tacoma and just asking, 'What are you guys doing right now, and what is it that with our resources and with our current leverage and position within the community, where do you guys see us plugging in?' And so, I think there's a lot of interest around our CHAP program and seeing how we can potentially expand it so that it can impact more students and potentially not just homeless students but those who could be successful with college completion if they have some sort of access to housing. [...] So those are things that we've been tossing around, ideas that have come to mind because of these conversations. (GT.15)

Stakeholders also discussed more subtle changes in their organizations from participating in collaborative activities. For example, a nonprofit college access organization representative discussed how increased interactions, especially with the TPS, through the collaboration changed recruitment tactics and strategies for serving students eligible across programs in their school:

So being able to see career counselors on a regular basis and support staff that are actually in the school that could get me into a classroom with who they know is helpful. So I think that it really has like shaped how and when I do my recruitment and also it was the people around the table and people in the schools that were like, "We really could use some help with this," or "Man this, we haven't filled this position. I wish we had a tutor on campus," and asked if we could start filling those and what that would look like. So, yeah, I would say that it's had a pretty big impact on how we all kind of cope through. (GT.09)

Another nonprofit stakeholder described that partnership within the TCSN has impacted how they emphasize priorities among staff in planning their college access strategies:

So, my staff have the relationship with many of their students and now they need to hand it off to other people at the college level. I would not have been aware of

that going on really too much without being involved in TCSN. If I wasn't involved in TCSN, I would not have encouraged my staff in the way that I am. Because, I mean, when things first get off the ground, they're a little messy, right? And my staff, complain about that. But I'm like, 'Nope, this is important because we're working on the next step, which is to get kids through college and we know summer melt is a real thing.' [...] So, I do think being part of TCSN and understanding that kind of stuff helps make those kinds of connections happen. (GT.16)

For another nonprofit stakeholder, connections made through TCSN meetings helped shift the organization's approach to College Bound Scholarship sign-ups. In discussing their ability to meet a state level representative of the College Bound Scholarship in a TCSN meeting, the participant relayed these interactions changed how they discuss financial supports with students:

Just that meeting at that TCSN day really changed the approach of how we talk about ensuring that our students have some monetary backing and incentive in completing their education and be successful with their high school studies and career and then moving into their post-secondary plans. (GT.17)

### **Data practices and utilization**

Another force influencing how TCSN activities shape different postsecondary-related outcomes in Tacoma is data collection and utilization. Within the TCSN, several stakeholders acknowledged that conversations about improving data – what to collect and how to define measures – focused on how to better understand college enrollment and college completion. A nonprofit stakeholder described the year-long process of defining better metrics for high school to college transitions:

Then, I think, two, three years ago, we spent a year as a work group saying, 'We want to better understand.' Because Graduate Tacoma has these metrics all the way through, right? But the metrics beyond high school, for college completion and college going, felt like they were a little all over the place, and the data sources were a little all over the place. So we spent a year, a sub-group saying, 'Let's drill down what the definitions of those metrics that we really want to track are.' That's where some of the work that we had done around the software tool, working with Clearinghouse data was helpful. We decided that we wanted

Clearinghouse, the district's Clearinghouse data, to be the definitive source rather than some aggregate data from the state and some role-level data from the district. There was a year of defining those metrics. (GT.03)

Attention to data, particularly around college enrollment and completion, also helped the TCSN prioritize activities and manage its relationship with the TPS. Elaborating on its district-led strategy, a TPS administrator described how using data informed progress on College Bound sign-up effort and promoted accountability among district staff:

And like I had one counselor that took it on and he ran the monthly report. So we use data to drive our efforts. We produce a monthly report of every school and the percentage of 7th and 8th grades that had their application completed. And we hold ourselves accountable. There's a public document that we shared at TCSN, and then to the building administrators. So, when a principal sees that their school's doing really well, or needs to improve... I mean, using data is critical. Was critical then, still critical today. (GT.26)

A TCSN member linked the emergence of the What's Next event as one way to respond to increasing high school graduation rates. This stakeholder suggested that data showing little progress on college enrollment and completion sparked discussions on how to shift priorities:

The number projects. Those have all been great things, but I think we're really trying to be more deliberate, to really select priorities and really invest our time and efforts in the things that need to be invested in now. It's why What's Next emerged. We've looked at this. "Okay, that's great. We're increasing our graduation rate. But what about the enrollment and completion goals for a college degree or a certificate?" (GT.02)

TCSN members also spoke to how data conversations shaped practices within their own organizations. A community college stakeholder explained how the focus on data led to shifts in offering more financial aid workshops during their recruitment process, stating:

I know one of the things that we've done is respond to some of the data that we see in TCSN. And, so, for example, one of the data points that has come out is the percentage of students at Tacoma Public Schools who complete the FAFSA or

WASFA, and it actually has a lot of room for improvement. And, so, I know that we do a lot of events on our campus where we try to bring students there. We call it Money Days, or Ways to Pay, you know, and, and those are indirect responses to understanding that for students, that financial piece is really key, and we need to work on that early. We go to every one of the high schools and offer financial aid workshops. So, I think that's one example. (GT.05)

A representative from the Tacoma Housing Authority indicated that the metrics developed by Graduate Tacoma influence their work, particularly around the Elementary School Housing Assistance Program (ESHAP). As this stakeholder described, “In the past, it's been heavily academic based, but now we're trying to capture more of the softer, non-academic type of benchmarks.”

Improvements and conversations around data collection may facilitate further organizational buy-in and learning from TCSN network partners. A Graduate Tacoma staff member surmised that, as organizations delve into community data, organizations “I think are sort of coming and staying because they're seeing results in improvements for their students or improvements for them internally or something like that, so I think the response is good.” (GT.04). The TPS stakeholder pointed out that data “is something that people can rally around. You can see the efforts of your work.” (GT.26) City of Tacoma leaders also discussed that Graduate Tacoma’s Community Reports, alongside the use of a data policy tool called the Tacoma Equity Index, were resources often relied upon to ensure “we're doing policy or starting from an equity standpoint.” (GT.20) Understanding graduation rates alongside other health and social indicators for one Tacoma politician is “part of the bigger rubric” and “part of the greater conversation” in developing various social policies in the city. (GT.22)

Work within Graduate Tacoma and in the TPS to improve data practices also served another purpose – to bring more accountability within the educational system for

improving student performance – even if it may not always have been welcomed. A Tacoma politician explained that, while Graduate Tacoma fashioned themselves in their perspective as an “accountability arm” for the district (GT.20), their approach was “not really helpful” at times in promoting failures of the TPS (GT.20). But, a longtime TCSN participant asserted that Graduate Tacoma “has also brought a level of accountability and visibility that’s driven that [college completion] work,” but that “the district was getting there on its own.” (GT.03). Holding “ourselves accountable because we publicly reported [to] TCSN each month how we were doing, laying it right out there” was really impactful, according to the Tacoma politician, since “different partners would ask really good questions that caused the collaboration to dig deeper...” (GT.20).

Data collection and utilization continue to be negotiated within the TCSN but point to mutually beneficial relationships among community partners brought on by the sense of shared community understanding around student performance. With both TPS and Graduate Tacoma embracing data collection and utilizing data to inform collaboration activities, such data practices seem to help more partners find ways to be responsive through the TCSN activities enacted.

### **Addressing educational equity**

Embedded in Graduate Tacoma’s mission, as well as StriveTogether’s Cradle to Career Network mission, is a stated commitment to improving educational equity and “reducing racial and income equity gaps” across various educational indicators measured in the collaboration (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b, para. 1; StriveTogether, 2020b). Beyond this stated commitment, equity-related issues were more implicitly discussed by participants. Stakeholders discussed targeting particular groups for services,

disaggregating data by different subgroups, and eliminating gaps between groups of students as characteristics of equity-driven action. One practice seeming to define the collaboration's efforts to promote equity is providing publicly available data dashboards that disaggregate multiple educational outcomes by race/ethnicity, poverty status, student ability status, and homelessness status when possible. According to Graduate Tacoma's Data Center (Graduate Tacoma, 2020b), the purpose of the data dashboards is "to help inform strategic interventions" in its CANs. The Data Center is intended "to share trainings, techniques and tools for partner organizations and the community to better use data for equity." (FAQs; Graduate Tacoma, 2020b).

A nonprofit leader suggested that having "gaps eliminated" among low-income, first-generation, or underrepresented students of color is a shared definition of equity in the collaboration:

This is a place where I actually really believe that just about everybody sitting around the table brings that lens and commitment to the work. I think different folks will talk about it differently and use different language. Folks will use more activist language around that. Others will be more strategic or not be quite as direct in, but I think that there's no...my experience has been that everyone there is thinking, 'The low-income kids, the first-generation college kids, underrepresented students of color in my classroom. I'm pulling for them. I want to see their outcomes. I want to see the gaps eliminated.' I do think that's a common denominator around this table is everybody is thinking it. (GT.03)

Stakeholders also see their efforts to target specific students as commitment to educational equity. A postsecondary institutional stakeholder emphasized needing to define equity better in the collaboration, but believed that work focused on the College Bound Scholarship was an equity-focused initiative because it targets low-income students:

One is that the College Bound Scholarship itself is for low-income families and so that's an equity focus initiative from looking at income levels. We have really



been grappling recently and we're like we really need to define what we mean by equity. (GT.06)

Despite different aspects of equity work emphasized among collaborators, differences at least based on race/ethnicity and poverty status are slowly being minimized in shares of students graduating from high school on-time, and to some extent, among students providing VANI documentation. Improvements in College Bound Scholarship sign-ups also are improving the opportunities for low-income students across the district to take advantage of need-based aid at state institutions. While challenges enumerated in the next section frame perceptions that stakeholders have towards addressing equity in the collaboration, how a commitment to equity is translated into collaborative strategies show promise for the future of the collaboration in furthering their equity-related goals.

#### *Challenges in addressing educational equity issues*

One challenge raised by TCSN stakeholders is coming to agreement on what equity-driven work should look like. Some stakeholders felt attention to equity in Graduate Tacoma is deeply ingrained in its practices as commitments to equity drove the founding of the collaboration:

And so one of the things that helped us out a lot was that we came out the gate with equity embedded in our DNA as something that's operationalized in action, not something that's objectified in outcome, right? (GT.14)

Another program manager at a local nonprofit described that those at the table often self-select into being part of educational equity work in the collaboration. To them, other members are really the “choir members” who are dedicated to racial equity issues in their work:

I think around the TCSN table for instance, the end, I'll speak also just as true, around the early learning CAN that is part of, those bring the people who are literally around the table, who are passionate about racial equity because they see

every day when they go back to their organizations or into their classrooms or buildings or wherever, they're not getting served equally and they hear the stories or their part of the stories or whatever and so they come and they say we have the power to rewrite this narrative and we've got to. And so the folks who, and I speak the saying I'm preaching to the choir here, these are choir members that come to the CANs, I think. And I am grateful for that every time I go, but that we don't need to start and we don't need to define what an ally is or ... I mean we don't need to go back. Everyone sort of leans in. (GT.01)

But, imprecise language around equity discussed by at least two different stakeholders also influenced perceptions of commitments to equity by the TCSN. A Graduate Tacoma staff member perceived that rather than explicit labels of being an “anti-racist organization” as one expression of being equity-oriented, the collaboration’s equity language is “euthanized,” suggesting challenges in devising a shared understanding of equity among collaboration members:

And then sometimes I think our language isn't strong enough. Like for example we don't really say we're an anti-racist organization and often times our equity, I feel like our equity language gets sort of euthanized or something. So it's more palpable to maybe sort of centrist liberals or something that you're going to have money and want to give it away and feel good about themselves and that's equity to them, right? And so that's going to be a constant struggle. That's kind of part of the work too. (GT.04)

In the strongest critique of TCSN’s equity work, one TCSN stakeholder explained that “generalized” and “nonspecific” attempts to understand gaps in disaggregated data results are ineffective attempts to address inequities:

I don't think TCSN has done a great job of really looking at those inequities well, and looking at the disaggregated data and saying where there are gaps and what are we doing about it. I don't think, I think in general, we do serve students that are first gen, students of color, but it's a very generalized, nonspecific, not pulling a partner to us getting the data to do that. So, I do think we have a lot of work to do around that and [participant’s organization] in relationship to that. (GT.16)

For this stakeholder, more equity-focused practices for the district and TCSN would be modeled after practices especially around utilizing data. They described how more

careful attention to breaking down data available can ensure that their services are “helping more of the right people” where “help need[s] to happen most:”

We look at data that's different than the school district. Like, I just looked recently at college enrollment rate disaggregated by students that we had that had a higher than 3.0 GPA when graduating from high school, and those who had lower than a 3.0 from graduating from high school and the difference between those. So, I am looking at that and saying to my staff things like when we were recruiting, we really do need to be looking more at the ... our numbers look better if we do it above the 3.0 but we want the 2.0 to 3.0. Because that's who needs it. That's who needs our services. Right? It is not about us getting better numbers. It's about us helping more of the right people. So, I don't see the school district doing that, taking work. I think they follow our lead to some degree in TCSN and that first-gen students are prioritized. But I don't, I just don't think equity is as big as it should be in our circles. I don't think we're really carefully looking at the indicators and saying, ‘Where's the help need to happen the most?’ (GT.16)

Another challenge in addressing educational equity issues is organizational capacities. Some stakeholders may feel little need to reassess equity practices if they perceive that what their organizations does is already working with an “equity lens.” While confirming that Graduate Tacoma is committed to advancing equity, a TCSN stakeholder elaborated that this does not fundamentally change their activities:

I mean, I think that Graduate Tacoma is always looking at everything through an equity lens. If you're asking if there's a strong, specific focus on minority-type groups compared to other groups, I don't know. That's kind of tough to respond to. I mean, I feel like everything that we do is, we're trying to do it through an equity lens. I don't know that I would say that because Graduate Tacoma has that focus that it has influenced us to have more of that focus, because that's essentially who we've been from the beginning. We only recruit students who identify as people of color, so that is our focus is to ...but, yeah, if you're asking if Graduate Tacoma's focus on that has influenced our own equity lens, I wouldn't say so, only because we've already been doing that. (GT.10)

A Graduate Tacoma staff member also noted that organizational ability to address equity concerns may be limited based on who is present at meetings. For them, there is need for senior leadership and “folks with power” to be active in their work. This staff member

noted that senior leadership are not usually attending trainings to discuss equity issues and so limit how much organizations will respond:

But the other fun part to that is every time I do an equity talk or lecture, it's all folks who do direct service from the institutions. Who is the CEO, who was the ED of the program, right? And that's nobody. And so I also think that's problematic and I try to call that out. So it's like, well, we still need to change your organization then. Because the folks with power aren't learning any of this, right? They just know it's sort of what they want to sell as their commodity and what the relationship is. (GT.04)

Organizations may also feel constraints in how to target students for services without access to even more granular, student-level data. One Tacoma postsecondary institutional stakeholder worried about limitations to a new student data management system internally:

One of the things that's been really hard is we have moved to a new student management system. So it's...we've moved to people soft instead of our old homegrown system. And within that there's a...so it's just Tacoma community college in the Spokane community colleges that are...have implemented so far. And it's going to roll out to everybody else. [...] But within that, we...there's a new application and the application does not require students to in any kind of demographics, and it's really been harmful I think, to our ability to respond, and because we have a huge percentage of students that are considered unknown. So while we disaggregate by race, ethnicity, age, you know, and gender, number of factors. We're kind of hampered by that, I would say. (GT.05)

A Tacoma Housing Authority participant echoed similar concerns about “capturing the accurate data” to know best how to distribute services:

Yeah, that's a good question. I would preface that all by saying I think there's a lot more equity work to be done, especially within our realm of housing. There's a lot left for us to do around capturing the accurate data so that we can figure out really who's being served well and who's left being unserved or not served well. So to that point, I would say we barely scratched the surface. We just kind of figured out our data collection methods, and we're just at the point in which we have better technology and software that we've invested in to help us do so. (GT.15)

A postsecondary institutional stakeholder acknowledged these constraints when also discussing struggles with ensuring projects more specifically meet the needs of

“minorities” or “non-traditional students:”

I, and we just ... I don't, that's part of every single project that we do and plan that we do, that we are making these very intentional that's different. I think there is improvement to be made there. So, I don't see very often it being completely targeted to that specific group, it just is part of whatever project we do. But, for being a project that's completely targeted to minorities or non-traditional students, into a certain part of our program, that's something that we're really lacking on right now. (GT.11)

Targeting students also raised another related concern for a nonprofit program manager - how to advance equity without stigmatizing students who are the target of said services. More specifically, this program manager wondered about whether the College Bound Saturday event may put too much emphasis on being low-income at the expense of being inclusive:

With equity and diversity work, it's, I mean it's the forefront of what my passion is and a lot of people around the table, but I think sometimes could get to like groups to this like College Bound. Because like it was, we were so fixated on like College Bound Saturday, but then we started asking, ‘Well, why are we doing just one Saturday?’ It's so the cameras and media could be there not necessarily, because that's the best way to deliver info. And then it's like, ‘Well, why are we only invited College Bound seniors?’ Like why... we have this kind of Catch-22 where College Bound students start feeling stigmatized at times because it's like, ‘You're kind of grouping me as the poor kid, and why can't my friend come with me who's not College Bound?’ And I think that we could get rid of a lot of that stigma if we just were more open to anybody coming and not just focusing on College Bound. (GT.09)

### *Relationships between equity focus and collaborative practices*

Despite several challenges discussed by stakeholders, participants also described practices or strategies undertaken collaboratively or in their organizations to address educational equity. Several stakeholders within Graduate Tacoma’s operations discussed trainings and retreats to develop shared understandings about issues of educational equity. Whether those trainings have resulted in new ideas or strategies is unclear. A

Graduate Tacoma staff member noted “there's been different professional developments with equity consultants who come in and do some trainings” (GT.04). Another staff member positioned Graduate Tacoma as a source of professional development, especially around equity. In their view, part of the function of Graduate Tacoma is to also help provide that shared learning to the CAN stakeholders:

But they come here and they learn what that means. And they learn the tools on how to operationalize equity into their systems. And that's part of the professional development, really. So, you know, just... the same way we teach people how to use cloud-based tools so that they can get their stuff into FERPA compliance, platforms that allow us to be shared. (GT.14)

Another Graduate Tacoma staff member also shared how trainings for the TCSN delved into strategic questions exploring equity work:

We had a whole equity focus as part of our TCSN leadership team retreat. Just the fact that we really were saying we pay a lot of lip service to equity, but what does that look like? How do we define it? How does it drive our strategies? How do we bring that up? How does it play out in different organizations? We can't necessarily hold them to that, but what does that mean? I would say that we're asking those questions. We don't necessarily have the answers yet. (GT.25)

To structure equity considerations into the TCSN's work, a Graduate Tacoma staff person explained that through the revising process of Action Plans, work groups are asked to pay explicit attention to equity as they devise strategies for the year:

One of the things I'm going to be doing is helping to revise our, we have an action plan template that helps the work groups come up with their action plans, and I'm going to try to build in some equity questions so that the work groups, when they're coming up with their strategies, either asking the equity questions and how are we actually serving those? (GT.25)

Yet, incorporating explicit attention to equity was somewhat inconsistent across the 2018-19 TCSN Action Plans. Two of the five work groups – Middle School Outreach and College Bound Identity – provided more explicit attention in the equity indicator sections of their plans. Middle School Outreach specified, "Including outreach activities,

communication, events to all CBS eligible scholars, including materials in multiple languages, and interpreters at all events” in their plan while College Bound Identity noted, "Provide interpreters at all hosted events and materials in multiple languages.” The Action Plans also noted that for College Depot, a summer series of college-related events for high school students run by the TPS that TCSN supports, their equity indicator included: “Serving targeted AVID student population, first-generation, low-income students enrolled in Advanced College in High School classes. Follow-up includes access to year-long AVID tutoring support to support student achievement and access.”

As mentioned in the Action Plans, ensuring events were accessible in different languages turned out to be the most common approach undertaken by different organizations, even for work groups that did not provide specific equity indicators in their Action Plans. In discussing evolving approaches to financial aid workshops across the city, a TCSN leader and postsecondary stakeholder discussed more explicitly providing bilingual services at events:

Some of the other things are the ways that we have partnered with different organizations to make sure that we've got some folks that are at least bilingual at some of the sessions and that community forums that we are putting out indicate where we have support in different languages, and what those languages are. (GT.06)

One postsecondary stakeholder discussed that over time, their institution has specifically provided more college and financial aid workshops in Spanish:

Yeah, we have done different things over the years, yeah. For instance, when we talk about minorities, I speak Spanish so we bring in a group of Spanish-speaker staff to be able to for Spanish speaker families to apply for aid there. At some of these workshops. Or even present completely in Spanish, there's a huge population of Spanish families. That's one thing, another thing is providing information of what a technical college is, what options they have. (GT.11)

Another nonprofit stakeholder further discussed the need to ensure language translations at events, specifically recalling assistance provided by Graduate Tacoma during a College Bound Saturday event:

I don't feel like we purposely talk about it but I think it's always at the forefront is kind of what I would say is always thinking of different populations of students throughout the community and how can we help them and what can we do? You know, we had a big thing back to this College Bound Saturday we didn't have interpreters at the event. We've got all these parents that don't speak English, and so if you're inviting parents to a workshop to help your students access a scholarship, and if they can't understand the la- why are we not having interpreters there you know, to make that happen? And so they were responsive to that. (GT.07)

A housing specialist in Tacoma reflected on the equity actions in their programs and also emphasized practices shifting towards ensuring materials and information are accessible to non-English speaking audiences:

But to that point, our slow integration with folks in public health has been helpful for us to really figure out that cultural relevancy, that language, that ethnic acknowledgement piece, especially around how do we communicate with our households, many of whom where English isn't their first language, or whatever background circumstances that exist in their respective life. So we're trying to be more aware of that, and we're getting to question and also audit our material so that they are hopefully more accessible and representative of the folks that we serve, as well as that information is truly accessible for them and not something that otherwise wouldn't be able to access. (GT.15)

Some stakeholders discussed strategies to increase geographic equity in how information is provided from the TCSN. The TCSN Network Manager explained that to help programs serve students at scale, particular attention is being paid to neighborhoods “that most need” services:

What we started to say is, how can we even make sure that our strategies are serving students that are most in need, in the neighborhoods that most need it. So, for example, if we have an event, is it in an area that is close enough and has transportation, or is in a neighborhood that it is going to have the biggest impact, or where are we putting our efforts? We are asking those questions. (GT.25)



Additionally, a college advisor within the TPS discussed conducting outreach in underserved neighborhoods of Tacoma to hold financial aid workshops through the TCSN:

Yeah, so I think one specific example is for the FAFSA/WASFA work group I'm a part of, we really thought about it as far as what location we would provide the FAFSA/WASFA workshop to. So we looked at the South side and the East side of Tacoma, which are traditionally underserved areas of the city, and making sure that there's presence there, there's information for students there, and having that. And then with the upcoming school year, we're also thinking about our upcoming workshops that we're hoping to have and thinking about working with the libraries and other churches and other people in the community that are non-traditional people but can also provide some spaces where the students that might not normally come would come to those places and thinking about things with a different perspective and thinking out new partners to work with on that. (GT.23)

Describing how their organization approaches equity work, a nonprofit stakeholder discussed a more school and context-specific approach to providing services based on student demographics as well:

A lot of times like our staff at the school still work with different organizations so- and it's not across the entire district, so we have one high school that has more of a Latino based population and so they'll work with [Tacoma community organization] [...]. And so they'll work with some organizations specifically that cater to kind of their student culture. And then others you know will work with the Black Education Roundtable, so it just depends, there's communities that would benefit each school a little differently. (GT.07)

Stakeholders within postsecondary institutions felt they addressed equity issues through more targeted student outreach. One outreach coordinator at a Tacoma postsecondary institution discussed plans to be “more thoughtful” in the recruitment of students particularly for a Washington dual credit program called College in the High School, explaining:

I would include them in this outreach campus partners group. Kind of the sole focus is information sharing, making sure that we're talking about the college in a pretty central way in terms of highlighting things that we need to be highlight and not, best practices of those kind of things. And also really rolling out enrollment

initiatives too. So I think that's where we're gonna be collaborating. Starting there and then my hope is to just really ramp up with particularly recruiting students of color and historically marginalized communities in a much more thoughtful way than I can see we've done in the past. (GT.08)

Another technical college stakeholder discussed more generally targeting “special populations” differently:

What you just said, we're going to target the students a little bit differently, our approach will be different. Which it should be, right? You can't have the same approach for every single student. Hopefully maybe in the future, we can get somebody that recruit special populations for us. That's all they do. We need to look at keeping our outreach material in different languages. There's a lot of things that go hand-in-hand with that when it comes to outreach. (GT.13)

In summary, collaboration stakeholders continue negotiating how to best address equity-related issues together. Evidence suggests rhetorical commitments among stakeholders to reducing differences across groups in educational outcomes. Despite concerns that TCSN strategies are not equity-focused enough, the strategies described among TCSN stakeholders have an implicit equity orientation as they are focused on low-income students (e.g., College Bound Scholarship) or are oriented towards targeting underserved students in Tacoma (e.g., English language learners). The continued development of these strategies, and perhaps making other strategies more explicit within TCSN’s work groups, may further equity-driven goals so they become more aligned with desired equitable outcomes.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Goals to increase postsecondary attainment and improve equity are ubiquitous nationally (Lumina Foundation, 2020), across states (Education Commission of the States, 2017; SHEEO, 2021; Ward et al., 2020), and locally (National League of Cities, 2017). Cross-sector education collaborations are one potential way to address the “wicked problem” (Head & Alford, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973) inherent in this concern for increasing postsecondary attainment – the disparate access to opportunities for different communities to reap the many benefits of a postsecondary education, including advancing upward socioeconomic mobility. Using case study methods, this study explored how one cross-sector education collaboration is pursuing improvements in postsecondary attainment in their communities by addressing the following research questions:

1. What strategies do organizations participating in a cross-sector education collaboration employ to improve postsecondary readiness, access, and attainment?
2. How do the strategies implemented among collaborating organizations shape efforts to improve the desired postsecondary-related outcomes and equity in those outcomes for the collaboration?
3. What forces contribute to the strategies that collaborating organizations use to improve postsecondary-related outcomes and equity in those outcomes?

At the heart of these questions was a motivation to understand what complex change in educational systems looks like in a deliberately collaborative and place-based cross-sector context. Based on frameworks conceptualizing the multiple layers of context

involved in promoting postsecondary access and attainment (Perna, 2006) and that address the components of cross-sector collaborative work (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; Provan & Milward, 2001; van Tulder et al., 2015), cross-sector education collaborations have the potential to promote inter-organizational and intra-organizational changes that improve educational outcomes for underserved students if focused on improving programs and policies for students in equitable ways.

Despite studies emerging that begin to outline the purposes, structure, and design of cross-sector education collaborations in education (e.g., Henig et al., 2015, 2016; Riehl et al., 2019), few studies make explicit the links between collaboration processes and structures and the potential educational outcomes they promote. This case study focused on the specific postsecondary-related strategies advanced in a cross-sector education collaboration (RQ1), how those strategies work in concert with collaboration processes and structures to address targeted postsecondary-related outcomes (RQ2) and the forces contributing to how those strategies addressed postsecondary-related and equity goals in the collaboration (RQ3). This chapter discusses limitations, three primary conclusions from the study findings, and considers their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

### **Limitations**

As with other approaches and methods, this case study involves several limitations in the understanding the implementation of postsecondary-related strategies in a cross-sector collaboration context. First, as a single case study in one city and community, details from Graduate Tacoma are not generalizable to the histories,

contexts, conditions, and evolution of practices occurring in other places that are embracing collective impact or cross-sector collaboration.

Another limitation is the embedded focus of the TCSN as just one of the CANs established by Graduate Tacoma at the time of this study. The approach taken in this study could be used to study any number of educational outcomes at the early learning and K-12 levels that the collaboration also hopes to improve. I focus on how collaborations improve postsecondary-related outcomes. I accepted a tradeoff between understanding the breadth of strategies and activities across the entire cross-sector collaboration with depth to explore nuances in the strategies that organizational stakeholders adopt to achieve these goals and the forces that influence the work of the collaboration.

This study is also limited to understanding Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN at one point in time. The work of the collaboration is evolving and extends beyond the conclusion of data collection for this study. A longitudinal study design would document how particular decisions played out across the TCSN and shed additional light on organizational changes and how the collaboration responds to its environment.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing on Perna's (2006) conceptual model for college access and choice, study findings demonstrate how the implementation of a cross-sector education collaboration cuts across school/community (Layer 2) and higher education contexts (Layer 3) to shape the environment in which students make postsecondary decisions. Findings also show how the state's context (Layer 4), especially through the provision of a need-based state financial aid program – the College Bound Scholarship – further influenced collaboration

development and the ecosystem in which students make college-going decisions. Cross-sector education collaborations also move their work forward in a torrent of activities and policy conditions, any number of which could or could not lead to desired community-level outcomes. Findings underscore the importance of considering how a package of strategies might be implemented across community organizations in addition to strategies promoted independently of the collaboration (e.g., Tacoma Whole Child Initiative, UWT Pathways to Promise).

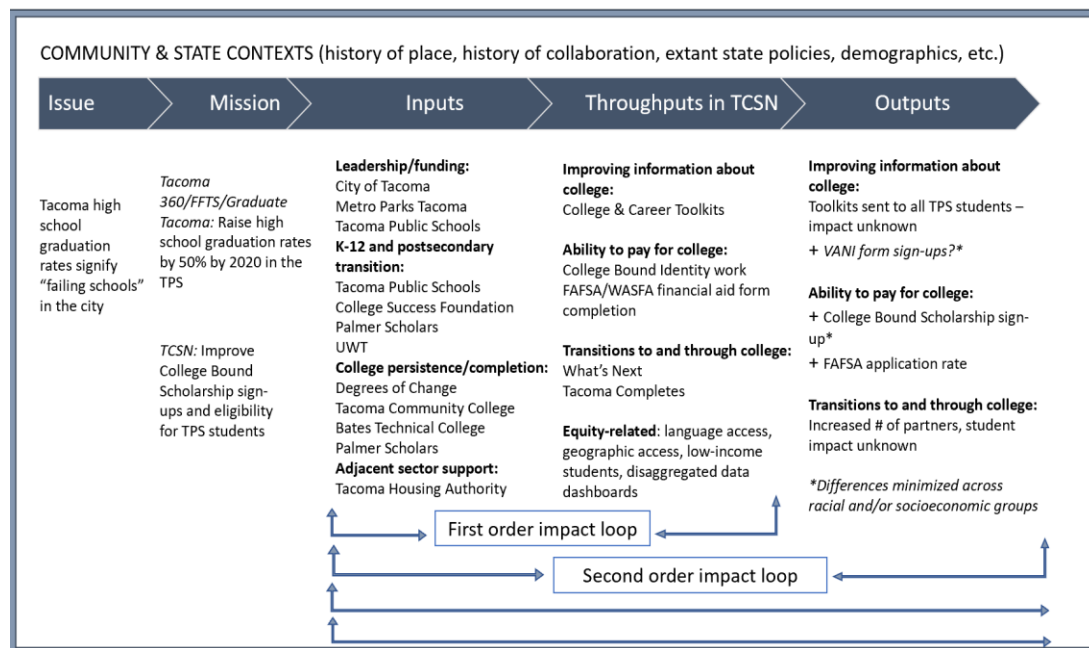
This study revealed the inner workings of a cross-sector education collaboration's approach to improving postsecondary attainment in its community. The TCSN within the Graduate Tacoma movement has contributed most to helping low-income students become eligible for the state's need-based aid program, the College Bound Scholarship. Other strategies are beginning to address more concerning "outcomes" such as declining overall postsecondary enrollment and completion rates, though how these activities (e.g., What's Next) further influence the college-going environment in the city is to be determined.

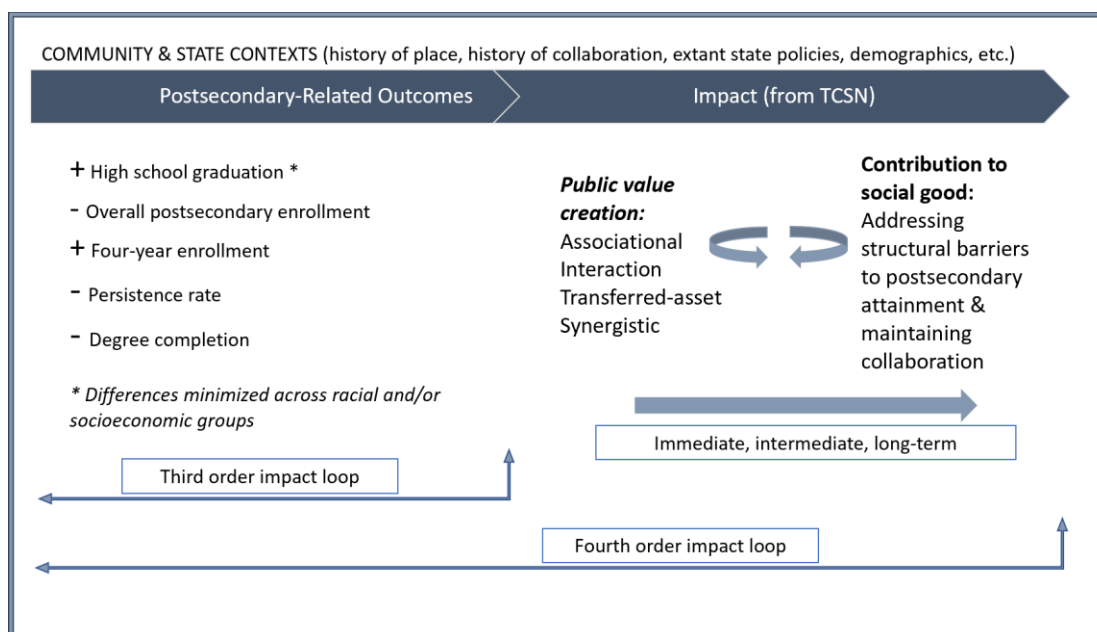
This study also drew from Bryson et al.'s (2015) and van Tulder et al.'s (2016) frameworks to better understand cross-sector collaboration conditions and outcomes. The evolution of Graduate Tacoma and embedded analysis of the TCSN's work in the movement help show how "inputs" (e.g., organizations and resources involved) connect to "throughputs," (e.g., activities), and lead to particular "outputs" (e.g., measurable results from activities), "outcomes" (e.g., whether collaboration has achieved its intended goals), and burgeoning "impact" (e.g., on larger public good or generating particular kinds of social value) (van Tulder et al., 2016). Figure 27 summarizes how different

components of this cross-sector collaboration may apply to the conceptual frameworks guiding this study. Several aspects of Graduate Tacoma’s evolution, the TCSN’s strategies, and structures and processes, give insight into what first-, second-, and third-order impacts, and potentially fourth-order impacts, may look like in an educational collaboration and how intertwined these processes are in shaping understanding about how and why strategies for postsecondary success were implemented.

**Figure 27**

*TCSN’s Influence on Graduate Tacoma’s Impact Value Chain*





Sources. Adapted from Bryson et al. (2015); Perna (2006); van Tulder et al. (2016)

The following sections are guided by Figure 27 and organize conclusions addressing the core research questions through explaining their associations to the different illustrated impact loops. The first main conclusion, addressing the first research question, is that postsecondary-related strategies developed among stakeholders are influenced by the organizational leadership and missions of organizations willing to collaborate (the inputs). Different kinds of organizations played different leadership and implementation roles at different points in the collaboration. Organizational engagement influenced how TCSN strategies evolved and provides the foundation for first- or second-order impacts to occur.

A second conclusion, related to the second research question, is the collaborative strategies that seem to have had the most influence on community-level educational outcomes were those that heavily relied on school district involvement. Reinforcing collaboration processes and structures have seemed to develop an environment where the



TPS can have autonomy in its various school-based policies and reforms, but where Graduate Tacoma can work across partners both internal and external to the K-12 school system to expand alignment across educational services and funders. The place where these forces meet arguably contribute to second- or third-order impacts observed in this cross-sector context.

Tied to the third research question, findings also illustrate that sustaining relationships across collaborating organizations generated other types of results important to consider in the potential long-term impacts of this cross-sector collaboration approach. Cross-sector collaborations may facilitate some aligned organizational responses due to mutual benefits from relationships established. Despite evolving challenges in defining progress towards reducing differences in student outcomes, the TCSN's collaborative work also demonstrates that partners can still begin to align strategies related to equity, which may hold promise for how the collaboration addresses educational equity issues in the future.

**Addressing first-order impacts: Postsecondary strategies implemented depend on organizations willing to partner**

The TCSN's prior history of collaboration and activities before it began to merge with the Graduate Tacoma effort in 2013 has continued to shape the collaboration's strategies. As noted in Chapter 5, the TCSN began in approximately 2008 through the leadership of the TPS and the College Success Foundation, a college access nonprofit with a presence in Washington state and Washington, D.C. Both entities along with other local partners representing postsecondary access/completion nonprofits (e.g., Degrees of Change, Palmer Scholars), postsecondary institutions (e.g., UWT, Tacoma Community

College, Bates Technical College), and adjacent sectors (e.g., Tacoma Housing Authority) developed a foundation for partnership that reached across the K-12 and postsecondary attainment continuum.

The momentum built between 2011 and 2014 to meet the 100% College Bound Scholarship sign-up rate goal across the TPS may be one of the strongest examples of what the TCSN achieved in collaboration. Graduate Tacoma's eventual emergence as a community-wide movement to address graduation rates and the envelopment of the TCSN and its College-Bound scholarship activities at the same time deepened focus on postsecondary-related student performance and the evolution of new strategies among TCSN collaborating stakeholders (e.g., What's Next event).

The Graduate Tacoma evolutionary story demonstrates that the unique organizational ecosystem of actors, their organizational "inputs" (e.g., willingness to commit staff time, commit financial/space resources, align communications to participate in collaboration, share leadership), and the variety of missions of those organizations drive elements of collaboration strategies or "throughputs" which shape the community context in which to improve educational outcomes. With organizations and institutions willing to partner at different nexus points along the postsecondary continuum (e.g., K-12 to postsecondary transition, degree completion), TCSN's "throughputs" reflect attention to strategies that address specific structural barriers to college-going at different points in the process.

Collaboration processes occurring to align inputs and throughputs to address these structural barriers to college would seem to inform what "first order impact loops" might look like when trying to understand how and why different strategies were pursued (Van

Tulder et al., 2016). For instance, the development of College and Career Toolkits was one way the collaboration tried to influence how students in the city receive information about college. The collaboration structure that allowed for reinforcing interactions between the TPS and TCSN (via the TCSN Network Manager), and for other organizational stakeholders to distribute and update these College & Career Toolkits served as ways to engage employees in partner organizations differently. This activity, as one of the main ways TPS stakeholders discussed interacting with the TCSN Network Manager, may have also helped guide collaboration learning on most effective ways to engage with the TPS to further sustain their presence in collaborative activities.

With two work groups devoted to College Bound Scholarship activities, the TCSN's commitment to support college affordability for the city's low-income students demonstrates a consistent equity orientation even as two core partners, the TPS and Tacoma Housing Authority, have played less prominent roles as they did in the past. By some measure, the organizational resources and expertise of these agencies may have led to addressing College Bound Scholarship sign-up activities to become sufficiently or systematically integrated into their organizational practices. Stakeholder responses from the TPS and THA also suggest that larger pushes for College Bound Scholarship enrollment have subsided, perhaps due to other changing and competing priorities (e.g., high school staff not wanting to stigmatize College Bound-eligible students, THA staff integrating information into their housing forms). That College Bound Scholarship sign-ups and related services remain a core throughput for the TCSN suggests that another facet of generating first-order impacts is maintaining momentum to reach collaboration goals and sustain attention after initial goals are met. In this sense, the TCSN, supported

by the Graduate Tacoma's role as the backbone organization, acts as the entity maintaining momentum to addressing financial barriers to college for students when other inputs and the resources they bring shift or change focus.

Leadership by Degrees of Change, an organization primarily focused on college student success and leadership development, and joint involvement of technical, two-year, and four-year postsecondary institutions, facilitated the evolution of the What's Next event to address summer melt and student belonging as students transition to college. This event acted as a gateway for Tacoma's local colleges to interact in the TCSN more visibly, and engaged postsecondary institutional staff members who, organizationally, represented admissions recruitment offices, student services, or outreach offices.

These organizational inputs and their correlating throughputs also encouraged renewed interest by the THA's College Housing Assistance Program in the emergence of Tacoma Completes. The development of Tacoma Completes points to the importance of strategic initiatives for providing a platform in which other community organizations become involved in shaping community postsecondary contexts. These postsecondary attainment-oriented strategies created in the collaboration provide opportunities to engage employees differently in their organizational duties, particularly between district high schools and postsecondary institutions. These findings suggest that first-order impacts arise in cross-sector collaboration contexts when inputs lead to throughputs that change something about the working relationships between stakeholders and create something new.

Stakeholders discussed their belief that evolving attention to throughputs/strategies that relate to addressing educational equity is due for the most part to the unique staff inputs in the collaboration - the values and expertise of those around the TCSN planning table who bring a commitment to pursuing educational equity. The first-order nature of this interaction between inputs and throughputs materializes through how the TCSN collaboration also supports training and development and encourages work groups to tie their goals and outcomes to equity indicators. Participants' questions about how the TCSN and Graduate Tacoma may improve equity suggest that equity-related throughputs are still in their early stages of development.

**Addressing second and third-order impacts: Strategies and activities with most perceived influence on educational outcomes heavily involved the school district**

Understanding the relationships between the postsecondary-related strategies of the TCSN and potential outcomes those strategies generated in Tacoma also highlights the critical role that school districts play in spurring systemic changes in education. Applying van Tulder et al.'s (2016) impact value chain framework, TCSN strategies can result in directly measurable "outputs" from the throughputs employed in the collaboration but are also distinctly linked to whether the collaboration met its broader, intended goals (e.g., outcomes). The content of second- and third-order impact loops that shape those outputs and outcomes, in this case, demonstrate the influence of school district players at different points in the process and the ability for the TCSN to learn how to work productively with the district, among other stakeholders, to achieve the types of outcomes it hopes to have.

One second-order impact directly correlated with the original mission, structure, and activities of the TCSN is the marked increases in College Bound Scholarship sign-ups rates for TPS students over time, and especially in years where all core cross-sector players including the school district, nonprofit stakeholders, housing, and postsecondary institutions were involved in some capacity. Descriptions of earlier efforts to raise College Bound sign-up rates indicated that institutions aligned their practices differently, but changes seemed most explicit for the TPS and Tacoma Housing Authority. TPS middle school counselors focused on signing students up and the THA incorporated application materials and information into their housing paperwork processes. Over time, as sign-up practices have become embedded into everyday practices, attention to College Bound Scholarship sign-up rates among both the TPS and THA has somewhat subsided, which the TCSN is actively trying to address in its future planning. The correlating output – generally unchanged College Bound sign-up numbers over the last several years - suggests that second-order impacts may be more temporal or that impacts eventually subside without core partners like the TPS (and THA) sustaining attention to those activities.

Improvement in high school graduation rates for Tacoma students also represents a distinct and measurable achievement for the city. The documented increases in high school graduation rates can be seen as a third-order impact from the broader Graduate Tacoma collaboration. As TCSN and other Graduate Tacoma stakeholders elaborated, these high school graduation improvements were more likely a result of district-led policies and activities, spurred in part by the early collaboration efforts of Tacoma 360

between the TPS, the City of Tacoma, and Metro Parks Tacoma more so than specific strategies that were TCSN-led.

The reflexive processes undergirding College Bound Scholarship sign-ups while high school graduation improvements were being emphasized in the city, contributed to more collaborative activity observed by participants. The public championing of rising high school graduation rates by Graduate Tacoma along with the City of Tacoma, TPS, and other players provides an important backdrop for why attention among collaboration members is now turning to postsecondary enrollment and completion. In short, if the district and partnerships could help mobilize actions to improve high school graduation rates, could they do the same in tackling postsecondary enrollment and completion?

Addressing that question for the collaboration is now much more directly related to TCSN's mission and strategies of the postsecondary arm of the movement. This examination also shows how second-order and third-order impacts interconnect across throughputs, outputs, and outcomes in a cross-sector context. Knowing the critical role of the TPS and building on the insights developed with the high school graduation rate movement, TCSN organizational stakeholders actively consider ways to work with the local school district on these goals but strike a balance in what has become more driven by other external stakeholders to the district. Tensions described by stakeholders about where credit should lie for Tacoma's progress, particularly on high school graduation, have not disrupted the collaboration because of the general acceptance and buy-in generated across major partners for everybody's role in the movement. While TPS still maintains a leadership presence in the TCSN and Graduate Tacoma, TCSN strategies do not seek to replace or override TPS' authority in determining how to best serve students.

Decentralization and bureaucratization for the school district system may also help ensure that school districts retain autonomy over their practices for improving learning and instruction, while still benefitting from partnership ideas that are aligned to strategic goals.

Mixed outcomes for the collaboration surrounding postsecondary enrollment and completion demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for TCSN stakeholders. FAFSA application completion rates are increasing in the district – a promising output that could also be connected to increased four-year college enrollment for TPS graduates. Findings are less clear for how TCSN strategies like the College and Career Toolkits or the What’s Next event contribute to improving overall postsecondary enrollment and completion in the community. Steadier increases in VANI form completion documented for the district until 2018-19 could suggest more students are interested in enrolling in college, but TPS building staff perspectives suggest the limits of this indicator in measuring student intent. Given that the What’s Next event began only one year prior to data collection for this study and the Tacoma Completes initiative was just evolving, it is too soon to tell whether there will be a larger impact on outcomes due to these different throughputs. What remains apparent from the past work in the TCSN and its relationship with the TPS in particular is that postsecondary-related strategies should bolster and align with school-level college preparation practices to achieve their goals.

How the TCSN addresses racial and socioeconomic equity in outputs and outcomes is also an evolving process. Data disaggregation and some attention within the TCSN to crafting activities and events promoting language and geographic accessibility



are the main approaches to improving equity in postsecondary-related outcomes. Findings also reveal that while there may not be shared definitions of what equitable practices should look like among collaborators, there are shared attempts to operationalize equity into practices for the TCSN. But these actions developed within the TCSN are also primarily carried out by external stakeholders and suggest fewer interactions with TPS partners on how to target strategies for specific groups or within specific school or neighborhood contexts. The absence of connections between TCSN equity strategies and TPS partner strategies could limit the effects of the collaboration on advancing educational equity.

**Moving toward fourth-order impacts: Partnership relationships spur other responses that shape opportunities for collaborations**

Organizational responses to collaboration are also important to consider amidst the interactions generating first, second, and third-order outcomes. Organizational responses may be the contents of “fourth-order impact loops” that encompass other types of impacts and address “the ultimate changes that one effects through the partnership” (van Tulder et al., 2016, p. 10). Fourth-order impacts involve how the TCSN’s role in Graduate Tacoma’s “impact value chain” addresses structural barriers to postsecondary attainment across groups, highlighted in Perna’s (2006) college access and choice framework. To demonstrate this type of “impact,” conceptually, TCSN inputs, throughputs, outputs, and outcomes would need to generate different forms of public value, whether in the immediate, intermediate, and/or long-term (Bryson et al., 2015; van Tulder et al., 2016).

Findings illustrate burgeoning organizational responses that relate to the generation of different types of public value (e.g., associational, interactional, transferred-asset, synergistic) across certain structural barriers to postsecondary attainment. Table 9 lists and summarizes the organizational responses discussed by stakeholders in the TCSN with consideration of how higher education and school/community contexts shape different student structural barriers to college (e.g., information about college, paying for college). Organizational responses are also sorted by the type of public value being generated based on my interpretation of their definitions (e.g., associational, interaction, transferred-asset, synergistic; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, 2014). As reviewed in Chapter 2, associational value considers whether there is evidence that organizational partners have increased visibility, credibility, or more positive reputations due to partnership. Transferred-asset value consists of partnerships generating increased financial resources or other intangible assets, like embedding new skills in an organization. Interaction value is more intangible and derived from learning, access to new and different networks, or other joint expertise developed to solve problems. Synergistic value, where new innovations, new leadership processes, or more political power are gained in the collaboration, can amount to some evidence of deeper impact from collaboration practices (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; van Tulder et al., 2016). Explaining how innovation is linked with synergistic value, Austin and Seitanidi (2014) describe that “when collaborators’ resources combine in unique ways to produce completely new forms of change, then there is the potential for significant organizational and systemic transformation...” (p. 33). This exercise suggests that TCSN strategies have generated each form of public value which have potentially developed across several structural

barriers to postsecondary success. Those organizational responses categorized as creating synergistic value were uniquely created through the TCSN's collaborative processes.

**Table 9**

*Possible Connections between Collaboration Responses, Postsecondary Structural Barriers, and Public Value Creation*

Structural Barrier	Type of Public Value	Graduate Tacoma & TCSN Organizational Responses
Information about college	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonprofit stakeholders discuss developing professional learning about others' college access practices</li> <li>• Nonprofit stakeholder perceptions of less competition between college preparation services in schools and more collaboration</li> <li>• Nonprofits benefitting from deeper relationships and sharing practices within TPS and other nonprofits</li> <li>• Postsecondary stakeholders learning more/targeting more services to local students</li> </ul>
	Synergistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TPS and TCSN collaboration to create College &amp; Career Toolkits and integrate on TPS website</li> </ul>
Alignment in K-12 and college curriculum	Transferred-asset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tacoma Community College receiving Core to College Spark Grant to improve alignment in high school and college course curriculum</li> </ul>
Paying for college	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonprofit organizations approaching staff training around financial aid differently through collaboration</li> <li>• TCSN responding to stakeholder feedback on College Bound Saturday to change format of long-standing event</li> <li>• Postsecondary institutions offering more bilingual Spanish college and financial aid workshops</li> </ul>
	Synergistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TCSN attending to language and geographic accessibility for FAFSA &amp; WASFA workshops</li> </ul>
Transitions to and through college	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TCSN partners engaging in data conversations to improve understanding of postsecondary enrollment and completion trends</li> </ul>
	Transferred-asset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degrees of Change/Graduate Tacoma StriveTogether Opportunity Grant for Tacoma Completes</li> </ul>
	Synergistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating What's Next Event and expanding to new postsecondary partners</li> <li>• Emergence of Tacoma Completes; THA re-assessing CHAP and CSA programs to align with Graduate Tacoma activities</li> </ul>

Overall collaboration maintenance	Associational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least one nonprofit re-assessing scope of their work, mission, strategic plan, and impact in community</li> <li>• Nonprofit stakeholder perceptions that being part of collaboration necessary to executing their job functions</li> <li>• Graduate Tacoma providing visibility and accountability among stakeholders</li> <li>• Perception that organizations need to be part of Graduate Tacoma to be competitive for local funding</li> </ul>
	Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing metrics and tracking educational outcomes on publicly accessible data dashboards</li> </ul>
	Transferred-asset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degrees of Change receiving College Spark Grant building on ideas and experimentation with TCSN</li> <li>• At least one nonprofit hiring new staff to help manage work in collaboration</li> <li>• Graduate Tacoma receiving Gates Foundation \$2.5 million grant to support efforts</li> </ul>
	Synergistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder engagement as Tacoma 360, Foundation for Tacoma Schools, and TCSN combined into Graduate Tacoma/Foundation for Tacoma Students</li> </ul>

Synergistic value may be emerging from the process by which the College and Career Toolkits were designed within the TCSN in collaboration with TPS. These Toolkits address a need by providing standardized and consistent college-going information for the district's students. While other research notes the importance of school personnel including teachers, counselors, and other college-advising professionals (e.g., Belasco, 2013; Clayton, 2019; Núñez & Oliva, 1999; Perna et al., 2008) as well as high school organizational contexts in disseminating college-going information (e.g., Duncheon & Relles, 2019; McDonough, 1997), the integration and use of the College and Career Toolkits for Graduate Tacoma demonstrates how a citywide movement can attempt to unify messaging on the information and supports for college as well. Nonprofit stakeholders mentioned incorporating these Toolkits into their staff training and direct service practices and otherwise noted how collaborations in the TCSN support how they learn from and build upon strategies discussed among TCSN stakeholders. While the

impact on students for these different practices is not known, these forms of interaction value may have reinforcing consequences across Graduate Tacoma's impact value chain for developing reinforced messages and structures around college-going. What is unclear, however, is how the Toolkits as a collaborative strategy address informational barriers that differ across racial and socioeconomic groups.

Lack of alignment in K-12 and college curricula is a systemic longstanding barrier for enrollment and success in postsecondary education (Kurlaender & Larsen, 2013; Perna, 2006; Perna & Armijo, 2014; Perna & Finney, 2014; Venezia et al., 2005). There is only minor evidence that TCSN activities have generated organizational responses to tackle this aspect of postsecondary enrollment and attainment. One TCC stakeholder noted receiving a grant to begin to tackle alignment in high school and postsecondary curriculum and indicated that the proposal was shaped by discussions happening in the TCSN. While the TPS and TCSN stakeholders have individual organizational strategies for addressing these barriers, TCSN cross-sector collaboration strategies have not yet directly addressed issues around this barrier.

TCSN activities have generated two forms of public value in their efforts to address barriers to paying for college. Planning financial aid events across the city has, according to several postsecondary and nonprofit stakeholders, shifted how organizations are thinking about frequency and accessibility of content delivery. While these collaborative activities do not centrally involve the TPS, by encouraging partners to lean further into addressing language and geographic inequities in financial aid programming access, the TCSN could be creating another form of synergistic value that could improve available community resources that help students take advantage of financial aid

available to them. Discussing how to help students access financial aid was the clearest way that the collaboration is making strides to develop strategies targeting specific groups. How nonprofit and postsecondary institutional stakeholders further iterate on this work and/or engage the TPS in ongoing efforts may play into how systemic and equitable change occurs in helping students pay for college.

The What's Next event and emergence of Tacoma Completes are two collaborative activities potentially providing synergistic value as they are entirely new strategies resulting from the work of the TCSN. Despite the unknown effects of these activities for postsecondary enrollment or attainment, the interaction value generated through access to better data about postsecondary enrollment and completion and the cross-sector buy-in across among postsecondary, nonprofit, and housing sectors (for Tacoma Completes) could be one immediate result of these activities. This buy-in seems spurred by funding availability through the StriveTogether Opportunity Grant creating transferred-asset value, particularly for Tacoma Completes. Given the shared understanding and goals among collaborators to extend the What's Next event to more postsecondary partners and further work with the TPS to develop this strategy, the TCSN may be encouraging more community-wide focus on the supports necessary to ensure Tacoma students have a smooth transition into college and recognize multiple pathways towards that goal. Like with other TCSN activities that do not have an explicit equity goal tied to the strategy, how these activities impact differences across groups remains unclear as well.

Postsecondary-related strategies in the TCSN may have developed certain forms of associational, interactional, transferred-asset, and overall synergistic value for the

cross-sector collaboration. As more stakeholders feel that being part of the TCSN is important to their organizational roles or organizational strategy (associational value), the TCSN gathers more legitimacy in its community context for organizing postsecondary-related activities. The generation of this type of value seems to inform the broader direction of the Graduate Tacoma movement, reinforcing and strengthening the synergistic value created in the development of Graduate Tacoma in the first place, utilizing Graduate Tacoma's public data dashboards to further understand and analyze postsecondary-related outcomes (interactional value), and helping to bring more financial resources to sustain the collaboration as a whole (transferred-asset; e.g., Gates Foundation grant).

### **Summary**

Whether TCSN's work in Graduate Tacoma and beyond has led to fourth-order impacts – where broader and more complex systems and societal change occurs – has yet to be determined. But findings from this study lay out the intersections between the content of postsecondary-related strategies (RQ1), their eventual measurable outcomes (RQ2), and different organizational responses and different conditions that feed back into sustaining postsecondary-related activities in a cross-sector context (RQ3). As TCSN activities are currently arranged to address different systemic barriers to postsecondary access and completion, intermediate and long-term effects may continue to build on the strengths of the organizations committed to the collaboration (the inputs) and whether and how those strategies continue to align themselves with TPS policies and partnerships. The TCSN also maintains a focus on fostering equity through implementing strategies that impact low-income students and in recognizing language and geographic

accessibility issues in the programming it designs collaboratively. Combined with the overarching commitment of Graduate Tacoma and individual missions of different organizational partners to address equity-related issues, the collaboration seems well-positioned to advance its equity-oriented work further. In continuing to advance its data utilization capabilities, the TCSN may be especially able to articulate other focused strategies for certain groups of students that are complementary to district practices in order to bolster impact.

### **Implications for Research**

There are several conceptual, methodological, and empirical research directions to consider in light of this study's findings. On the conceptual front, a challenge throughout this research study was navigating the multi-level and heavily interactive forces that constitute how and why particular strategies were developed to support postsecondary-related efforts in the cross-sector context and to what ends. While this study draws from conceptual frameworks developed for public administration to understand the forces involved in cross-sector collaboration, more research directed at applying and refining these and other frameworks for educational cross-sector collaborations is warranted. For example, current conceptual frameworks for cross-sector collaborations take little account of how cross-sector collaborations approach equity and differential outcomes that may transpire for different communities depending on the various interactions across different collaborative stages. This study begins to conceptualize strategies related to equity act as a particular "throughput" – or set of activities that are just as likely to be impacted by the broad range of inputs, outputs, and impact loops that occur in the cross-sector collaboration. One fruitful area would be to consider how frameworks like critical



race theory and intersectionality, which have well-developed bases to highlight inequities within and across educational systems (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016; Yosso, 2005) may reveal other mechanisms within the evolution, structure, processes, and outcomes that impede or facilitate ways that cross-sector collaboration address equity in their contexts. This conceptual direction may help further analyze the beliefs and motives of organizational stakeholders in addressing equity, the assumptions embedded within TCSN activities, or the ways the collaboration is viewed by or interacts with Tacoma's most marginalized or underserved groups. These types of insights would provide a fuller picture on whether Graduate Tacoma's work can address historical struggles for delivering educational opportunity to all its constituents or if cross-sector education collaborations reproduce the inequities that cut across the multiple types of organizations in partnership.

The challenges mentioned previously also complicate tools for methodological inquiry in understanding and assessing cross-sector collaborations. While this study focused on the postsecondary arm within a cross-sector collaboration, future studies should consider further probing other parts of a cross-sector collaboration's processes. Studies focused on understanding first to second-order impact loops or second to third-order impact loops across several different work groups in a collaboration may provide additional insights into their functions and effects, and intersections of impacts across the entire collaboration. Finding patterns in processes that occur between different impact loops could also help researchers and practitioners more easily assess whether partnerships are progressing in expected and desired ways. Future research could also attend to ways that these impact loops may vary in different community contexts facing

different economic conditions, serving different demographic groups in different kinds of locales, and with different types of organizations involved.

Mixed methods studies may also complement research that employs single or multiple-case study methods to study cross-sector collaborations. Mixed methods studies could first utilize quasi-experimental or other evaluation designs to understand connections between throughputs and outputs or outcomes as these connections rely most on outcomes that can be measured. Then, qualitative analyses into the impact loops explaining those processes would enrich how we understand both the content of different kinds of outcomes and how they come about. Evaluating whether particular strategies lead to particular outcomes while also probing sectors of collaboration across school, family, and community contexts would improve understanding of what types of cross-sector activities really matter for improving student outcomes and build on findings from this study about how cross-sector collaborations contribute to overall community-wide attainment goals.

Longitudinal research could inform how organizational stakeholders in cross-sector education collaborations respond over time to local community conditions and policies for educational systems change. Based on its status in the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, Graduate Tacoma is classified as a “proof point” collaboration, signaling its status as a collaboration that others can aspire to becoming in advancing systemic educational change in their own communities. When asked to reflect on whether they believe systems change has occurred in Tacoma, most stakeholders in this study had measured, though optimistic responses. How communities decide when a cross-sector collaboration has served its purpose is an open question. Studies that follow

organizational actors, organizational practices, and responses and outcomes over at least five years would yield insights into how cross-sector collaborations sustain engagement, relationships and change and respond to feedback in an ever-changing environment.

Findings from this research study also suggest other immediate empirical research directions. Some communities have pursued long-term and arduously complex collaborations to address major educational challenges while others have not. Not all communities have the leadership or public will for collaboration and communities vary in organizational assets, expertise, and resources to develop and sustain an effective cross-sector approach. Research could help develop further understanding of organizational assets or potential inputs that facilitate cross-sector growth and sustainability to help communities evaluate whether cross-sector strategies are viable in their context. This work should consider how assets and resources might vary across different metropolitan, political, historical, and collaborative contexts. Such work should also consider the different roles of community leaders, philanthropic funders and other well-established or trusted organizations to further understand funding mechanisms and other leverage points in which communities decide to pursue a cross-sector approach rather than other kinds of public or private investments.

Future research should also examine how students and families engage in cross-sector collaboration contexts, extending and expanding on work in this area (Ishimaru, 2014, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016). To address limitations in this study on how community-wide postsecondary strategies impact student college-going processes, studies should be designed in places with more mature cross-sector collaborations to analyze whether distinctions can be made between collaborative or individual

organizational strategies to boost postsecondary-related outcomes, drawing on how students and families respond to the different postsecondary-related strategies in their environment. Multilevel analyses that attend to potential differences in how cross-sector strategies are articulated or implemented across different schools would further inform how cross-sector strategies and other organizational and district strategies influence student college-going contexts.

This study also suggests that a cross-sector education collaboration may influence postsecondary institutional admissions/recruitment or community outreach efforts, as well as student services. Research exploring how cross-sector activities are shaping admissions practices, demographic make-up and enrollment of local students, and other local engagement activities for universities in their communities would provide further insight into how cross-sector dynamics play out in different organizational contexts.

Stakeholders recognized that Graduate Tacoma's existence creates a different type of accountability for the local school district and even to the City of Tacoma for the condition of education for Tacoma students. Further analyses on accountabilities and outcomes for cross-sector collaboration activities should focus on how cross-sector collaborations pursue equity-driven change. As a collaboration borne from leadership by city agencies (e.g., City of Tacoma, Metro Parks Tacoma, Tacoma Public Schools) and early informal organized efforts (e.g., early roots of TCSN), several participants perceived that Graduate Tacoma was a collective response driven by the "community" to promote change. But, for participants in educational spaces in Tacoma that "are a little more radical" (GT.16) than the TCSN, Graduate Tacoma is perceived as another powerful citywide player alongside the TPS – "not as authentic of a coalition as some

others are.” (GT.16) What these perceptions may indicate in the wider conversation of the role of cross-sector educational collaborations, especially as they gain more prominence in a community, is who and how they represent communities and how they tackle issues of power, particularly in managing who is involved in CANs and which organizations are receiving resources at the expense of others. Social network studies could identify organizations or other stakeholders that have influence or power in community contexts to better explain what types of strategies get implemented or funded and/or which partners are brought to the table to lead or influence the collaboration. Such research, especially conducted over time, could also help identify where there may consistently underrepresented groups or organizations, holes in services, missing organizational expertise that could address specific structural barriers being addressed in the collaboration, or to highlight organizations with different capacities to engage and further support the work of the collaboration.

Lastly, understanding the state contexts for cross-sector education collaborations is important to factor into future research. As the activities surrounding Washington’s need-based aid program, the College Bound Scholarship, demonstrated, cross-sector education collaborations can be important policy implementers of different state policies. As backbone organizations of cross-sector education collaborations become more interested in shaping policy (Riehl et al., 2019), their role as local policy implementers may also help to strengthen existing or new legislation meant to spur these cross-sector or inter-district types of collaborations, and potentially improve upon drawbacks or weaknesses of state P-20 councils for affecting policy change (Mokher, 2010; Perna & Armijo, 2014; Rippner, 2014). Graduate Tacoma at the time of this study was just

beginning to form its Advocacy Network to play a more active role in advocating for different state policies. Several TCSN stakeholders mentioned the optimism they had for this work to further bolster their efforts, especially around the College Bound Scholarship. Understanding the role of cross-sector collaborations as partners in policy implementation lead to several potential questions: What policies are most cross-sector education collaborations trying to support? What are the potential intended or unintended consequences for the passage of such policies? How do cross-sector education collaborations achieve their policy goals and in what ways might they be working with other coalitions, lobbyists, or other educational interest groups to inform state (or local) policy agendas?

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This study provides new evidence for how a cross-sector education collaboration implements its postsecondary attainment work and showcases how collaboration structures (e.g., work group management, organizational partner missions, funding) and collaboration processes (e.g., relationship management with school district and other external stakeholders, data practices, and equity-related practices) facilitate conditions to improve postsecondary enrollment and attainment in a community. While local cross-sector education collaborations are currently not at the forefront of most local and state policymaking enterprises, there are several ways that local and state policymakers can support and bolster impacts that cross-sector education collaborations are trying to make in their communities. On the local level, cross-sector collaborations like Graduate Tacoma benefit from the recognition and public championing of their cause by city leaders. As the educational efforts of cross-sector collaborations have the potential to

affect students across all city legislative districts, ensuring that local leadership and elected representatives are aware of and have open lines of communication with the collaboration is important. Local leadership may be able to generate early buy-in for different organizations to join cross-sector efforts or convene spaces that bring different citywide sectors together, like convening roles developed by the City of Tacoma, TPS, and Metro Parks Tacoma in the creation of Tacoma 360.

At local or state-levels, cross-sector collaboration backbone organizations, like the Foundation for Tacoma Students, need funding to operate like other nonprofit agencies. Given how context-specific cross-sector work can be in a local environment, local and state policy leaders should build awareness of where there may already be existing efforts and potentially provide invitations for grant proposals or other funding incentives to continue facilitating, but not imposing collaboration mandates. Backbone organizations are in a unique position in which their goals are not to compete directly for funding that organizational partners in the collaboration also need to operate. Local and/or state policymakers may consider how they designate human services, education services, or other general budget funds to sustain the operation of a local or regional cross-sector collaboration to further institutionalize its role in particular communities where cross-sector efforts may be particularly useful to address an educational challenge.

State and local policymakers should also consider legislation supporting the funding, infrastructure, and maintenance of state longitudinal data systems and their connections with other local or regional data systems. Data access and use helped bring a shared understanding to issues facing the TPS and plays a significant role in shaping and monitoring collaboration outcomes, especially related to equity goals. More data supports

should also ensure training programs for local collaborations to learn how best to use available tools in their practice. Policymakers can play a pivotal role by making this data more accessible, more user-friendly, and more current to the needs of various stakeholders in the collaboration to monitor progress.

Implications for practitioners are broken up between those that work within the backbone organization of a cross-sector collaboration and participating organizational stakeholders. Backbone staff, especially those who facilitate work groups or similar structures in the collaboration, can help maintain momentum and appetite for collaboration across partners and help organizational stakeholders focus on how to advance shared objectives and goals. Backbone staff can help (re)shape existing roles with school districts or neighboring postsecondary institutions, or other stakeholders they wish to engage with more or differently in order to further align strategies to structural barriers in the community's educational environment. They may be able to help organize conversations across specific schools or schooling practices or highlight efforts across collaboration partners that may be particularly relevant to those schools – informing, but not overriding or replacing the authority and expertise of other school and community leaders.

Backbone staff are also situated to know what is being prioritized across different CANs and where there may be important intersections in goals and strategies among different external stakeholders to a school district. To further align strategies to intended outcomes and impacts, especially in addressing shared commitments to educational equity, backbone staff might further develop capacities for analysis and reporting across all partners, contribute more in-depth or more frequent analyses specific to particular



demographic groups, schools, neighborhoods, or other contexts of interest across stakeholders, and/or leverage relationships with different community groups to learn with and from students, families, and community leaders about the strategies and direction of the collaboration. Backbone staff could also build awareness and support for efforts to disaggregate data across student subgroups, given how critical this information can be in monitoring progress towards equity. These efforts can all continue to bolster the interaction value created among partners, fueling the creation of synergistic value if directed more intentionally to structural barriers the collaboration wants to improve or resolve.

For organizational stakeholders involved in the collaboration, sustaining relationships through leadership and staff changes, and other organizational priorities, is an ongoing characteristic to this work. Organizational leaders can provide leadership in the collaboration and ensure staff have the resources needed to carry out collaboration goals. Organizational leaders can also ensure there are plans in place during staff transitions to ensure organizations maintain visibility in the collaboration. For school district administrators, this may mean considering how to orient committee and planning time among counselors, teachers, and other college advising support staff so that feedback loops exist that can be sustained between the collaboration and schools. Other organizational representatives may want to develop systems or reports to document internally how their programs or practices are shaping or are being shaped by work in the collaboration. These reports could work both as data tools that can be collated and used with the backbone organization to identify impact loops that may be occurring and used within organizations to demonstrate and articulate an individual's contribution to the

overall collaboration effort. Organizational stakeholders also hold considerable influence in leading and deciding the focus of collaboration strategies. Such stakeholders should continue to exercise their influence to promote strategies that address critical postsecondary-related structural barriers and regularly reflect on who and how to support programs and organizations that will help achieve collaboration goals.

### **Concluding Note**

While data collection for this study primarily occurred in 2019, the bulk of writing and analysis occurred in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, exacerbating and deepening already entrenched racial and socioeconomic inequities. Like countless other students, parents, and full-time working professionals, I juggled work and caretaking responsibilities for my young toddler and struggled with uncertainty and anxiety as seeming crisis after national crisis also unfolded. The racial, socioeconomic, digital, and other forms of inequities laid bare by the pandemic and magnified by concurrent racial and social unrest yet again called into question what responsibilities our public and private social institutions have to their people and communities to ensure their well-being, and literally, survival. To me, these crises are the conditions in which the full potential of implementing cross-sector collaborations in a society could be realized and are, in fact, necessary, despite their complexity.

As the year went on, I informally observed how Graduate Tacoma began responding to the educational needs of the Tacoma community. Organizational stakeholders in the Graduate Tacoma movement, like countless other communities, also pivoted in their response to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the immediacy of school and business closures by mid-March 2020, Graduate Tacoma administered a

citywide survey on immediate regional needs and managed a matching system to connect community members with service providers who could deliver on those needs. To address digital access inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, Graduate Tacoma also collaborated with TPS and a local internet provider to organize a Student Learning and Technology fund to support ensuring students and families had access to the internet and appropriate devices (Graduate Tacoma, 2020). By June, amidst the social unrest brought on by the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and too many other Black people, Graduate Tacoma's Executive Director, Tafona Ervin, penned an open letter committing Graduate Tacoma to becoming an anti-racist organization (Ervin, 2020). Addressing postsecondary-related needs, Degrees of Change and the College Success Foundation organized leaders within the TPS, college access nonprofits, and postsecondary institutions, creating a What's Next TPS Senior Check-In Initiative "that was distributed and promoted to all district seniors through multiple channels" (Education First, 2020, p. 17). Through its data expertise, Degrees of Change led efforts to share data with designated staff from high schools, college access nonprofits, and all Pierce County postsecondary institutions in efforts to inform and further support students (Education First, 2020).

These and other shifts occurring for Graduate Tacoma and the TCSN illustrate the capacity for cross-sector collaborations to be nimble to the needs of their communities. The ability to pivot and partner in times of urgency suggest that part of the impacts such collaborations can have is spurring new or different relationships between communities and the systems and structures we depend on to meet needs, make informed decisions, and bridge wide and inequitable service gaps. This study of Graduate Tacoma, and the

work of the TCSN, is one small slice into understanding the reverberating effects that a cross-sector education collaboration can have when shaped by a fundamentally troubling educational crisis. As practitioners, policymakers, researchers, funders, and community stakeholders reflect on how to address the current crisis of educating current and future students, the seeds of cross-sector education collaborations in more communities may already be planted or cross-sector work that already existed may have deepened. My hope is that this study can further illuminate what challenges and opportunities lie ahead for more communities dedicated to local cross-sector educational work as they rise to the challenge of addressing the fractured systems shaping the educational conditions of our nation's students.

## APPENDIX A: Consent Form



IRB Protocol Number: 832219

### ***Creating Local Cultures of Attainment: How Cross-Sector Education Collaborations Increase Postsecondary Attainment and Close Equity Gaps***

#### **Principal Investigator:**

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#### **Participant Consent Form**

You are being asked to participate in a research study as part of a doctoral dissertation by Elaine Leigh, Ph.D. Candidate in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education ("the researcher"). The study focuses on how organizations implement initiatives in local cross-sector education collaborations, focusing on policies and practices related to postsecondary readiness, access, and completion.

You have been asked to participate in this study because of your affiliation with an organization involved in a cross-sector collaboration or your familiarity with practices implemented in the collaboration. Participation includes being interviewed about the role of your organization in the collaboration as well as a short survey about your perceptions of the relationship network that exists between different organizations and agencies involved in postsecondary readiness, access, and completion in the collaboration. Interviews will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be conducted either in-person or by phone at an agreed upon time and location.

All data collected will be confidential and will be stored on a secure server protected with current firewall and anti-virus software and backed up daily. Computers are password protected and updated daily for the latest security patches. Only the researcher will have access to the data as well as the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania. Audio recordings of interviews will be uploaded to the server and then deleted from the recording device. All recordings and transcripts will be organized by alphanumeric codes, rather than by participant name. Any hardcopy materials are kept in

a locked suite and individually locked offices. All other data will be securely collected and stored. Names and any other identifying information will not be shared with others. Interviews will be conducted with the researcher only.

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. However, your participation can help stakeholders and researchers understand more about the complexities of organizational practices in a cross-sector education collaboration working towards increased postsecondary degree attainment and shrinking equity gaps in a community. The only anticipated potential risk to participants is embarrassment or discomfort in answering some questions. There will be no compensation for participation. The information collected will be reported without names and organizational affiliations attached to the wider education policy and research community as well as local community stakeholders in the cross-sector collaboration.

Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. You may stop participating in the study at any point or decide not to answer any questions without any consequences. If you do withdraw from the study at any point in time, any data collected or other personally identifiable information will be deleted from the secure server, including recorded interviews and signed consent forms. You may direct any questions about the study, including clarification of this form, to Elaine Leigh at [eleigh@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:eleigh@gse.upenn.edu) or 206-326-0134. You may also request for this form to be read to you. If the researcher cannot be reached or you have concerns regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns, or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I have read and understand the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to participate in an interview about cross-sector education collaborations.

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information of Principal Investigator:**

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## APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

### *NETWORK LEVEL*

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#### **Origins, Issue, and Mission**

- 1) Please state your name, title, and organization you work for in this cross-sector collaboration.
  - a. How long have you worked in this setting?
  - b. What do you do in your role in the organization? Would you describe your position as senior-level, middle-level, or entry-level in the organization?
- 2) What do you believe are the goals and mission of the cross-sector collaboration? How did this collaboration evolve from past initiatives? Why do you think the collaboration exists here?
- 3) How committed do you feel to the mission of the cross-sector collaboration?
- 4) What issues do you think the cross-sector collaboration is trying to tackle in this community?
- 5) What organizations are most involved or influential in the collaboration and what roles do they play in the collaboration?
  - a. How integrated are services across the network?
  - b. How does your organization decide who gets to participate in the cross-sector work?

### *ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL*

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#### **Inputs**

- 6) What is your organization's involvement in the cross-sector collaboration?
  - a. How did your organization's involvement start in the collaboration?
  - b. What types of resources were available to become part of the cross-sector work?
  - c. How has this involvement changed over time?
  - d. Who are your primary partners?
  - e. What are the major goals for your organization in being part of this collaboration?
- 7) To your knowledge, how has your organization participating in the cross-sector collaboration changed your organization and other organizations you work with?
  - a. New funding? What sources?
  - b. New staff or positions created?
  - c. Shifting of tasks?
  - d. New partnerships?
  - e. Insight into student outcomes?
- 8) What types of benefits have there been for your organization to take part in the collaboration?
- 9) What types of costs or drawbacks have there been for your organization to take part in the collaboration?
- 10) How do you think being part of the cross-sector collaboration has informed different policies or practices your organization adopts?

- a. How active is your organization in participating in the cross-sector collaboration?

## **Throughputs**

### *Postsecondary Strategies*

- 11) What does your organization do to promote postsecondary readiness, access, and/or postsecondary attainment in this community?
  - a. In promoting college academic preparation?
  - b. In promoting college financing and affordability?
  - c. In promoting student access to support and information?
  - d. In promoting college enrollment and completion?
- 12) Which programs/practices do you see as important to work in the collaboration and which work separate or outside the collaboration?
- 13) What do other organizations do to promote postsecondary readiness, access, and/or postsecondary attainment in this community within the collaboration or outside of the collaboration?
- 14) As your organization has become involved in the cross-sector work, how has your organization changed what it does related to postsecondary readiness, access, or completion have occurred?
  - a. If so, what kinds of changes have been made?
  - b. Why do you think those changes occurred?
  - c. How does being part of the cross-sector collaboration influence these changes?
  - d. If not, why do you think there have been little changes to programming within your organization?
- 15) Have there been any changes in your organization as you have engaged in cross-sector work?
  - a. In program culture?
  - b. Leadership or senior administration?
  - c. Communication?
  - d. Community engagement and awareness of your program?
  - e. In professional development or training opportunities?
  - f. Other?

### *Equity Practices*

- 16) Is closing racial/ethnic and/or SES disparities in college readiness, access, and completion a goal of the collaboration? Why or why not? How important is this goal relative to other goals?
- 17) Does the collaboration engage in any specific activities with the goal of closing racial and socioeconomic disparities in college readiness, access, and completion?
  - a. Are student populations targeted for specific services? Other community members?
  - b. Did this change due to collaboration?
- 18) How does staff learn about issues around race and socioeconomic disparities in the community?
- 19) Across the cross-sector collaboration, how does your organization work with other partners to achieve equity goals or engage the community?



- a. What kinds of resources are given to promote equity goals?

### **Outputs**

- 20) Has the collaboration been successful? How do you know? How do you define success?
  - a. What would failure look like for the collaboration?
- 21) How would you assess your organization's role in providing different postsecondary readiness, access, and completion services?
- 22) How has work towards these goals met your organization's objectives?
- 23) How would you assess the results of equity practices being implemented in your organization?
  - a. How do these practices align with your organization's objectives?
- 24) In what ways have lasting structures been implemented due to the work of the collaboration or your organization's role within the collaboration?

### ***COMMUNITY LEVEL***

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#### **Impact**

- 25) What is the community's awareness of this cross-sector collaboration?
- 26) How has awareness among community members changed around what this cross-sector collaboration does?
- 27) Have there been any changes in the community because of the cross-sector collaboration?
  - a. What kinds of institutional impacts do you think the collaboration has made – on local government? Schools? Other large organizations and institutions?
- 28) What have been benefits to the participating community in being part of this cross-sector collaboration? What have been the costs?

#### **Closing**

- 29) What other issues do you think are important to note about participating in this cross-sector collaboration?
  - a. Other organizations to speak to?
- 30) Is there anything else I should ask about how participating in the cross-sector collaboration?

## APPENDIX C: Observation Protocol

Event Location:	
Date & Time:	
Length of Meeting:	
<b>Descriptive Notes</b>	<b>Reflective Notes</b>
Who is attending the meeting? How were people notified or invited to the meeting?	<i>Add notes of group dynamics, emotionally laden moments, other running thoughts of interactions and meeting content.</i>
Who is facilitating the meeting? What is their role?	
What is purpose of the meeting? What is discussed at the meeting? What next steps or conclusions are made at the meeting? <i>(record structure and order of topics of meeting consecutively)</i>	
What questions are asked at the meeting? Who is participating? Who is less engaged?	

*Source.* Adapted from Creswell (2014)

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