NPEA Data Counts (NDC) is a data project run by the National Partnership for Educational Access (NPEA) that provides best practices, research, and resources around data collection and analysis to organizations, programs, and institutions committed to educational access for underserved students. The project also seeks to further understand the impact of NPEA members’ collective work on the broader educational access field and on positive educational outcomes for underserved students.

A key element of NDC is the sharing of best practices related to 10 Key Indicators of college access and success for underserved students. The goal is to help those who are working to expand educational access understand what to measure and why, common terms and definitions across the field, indicator benchmarks, and more.

NDC 10 KEY INDICATORS

Demographic Indicators
1. Number of participants served by a program in a given year.
2. Background characteristics (grade levels, gender, race).
3. Descriptions related to educational access challenges (low-income, first-generation, etc.).

Progress Indicators: Before High School
4. Staying on track in middle school.
5. Gaining access to competitive/independent school placement.

Progress Indicators: High School and Beyond
6. Engaging in academically rigorous courses during high school.
7. Taking proactive steps toward college admissions.
8. Graduating from high school.
9. Enrolling in a post-secondary program immediately after high school.
10. Persisting through degree attainment.

ABOUT NPEA DATA COUNTS

NPEA is pleased to continue our Data Champions Spotlights, in which NPEA features members who are achieving exceptional results and shares their stories with the broader field.

Our hope is that we can learn from one another about the variety of perspectives and approaches to data work that we employ in the interest of ultimately best supporting underserved students.

Our second Data Champions Spotlight focuses on Indicator 9: enrolling in a post-secondary program immediately after high school. Specifically, this indicator measures results for cohorts of high school seniors, and asks whether or not those students pursued post-secondary programs immediately after high school; for those who did, it asks about the financial aid gaps they faced.

In the NDC’s 2016 Data Collection Tool, 19 programs submitted responses for Indicator 9f (Financial Aid Gaps). For this Spotlight, we reached out to all 19 programs, as we know it is impressive to collect this rigorous data alone (regardless of results). Four of those 19 programs responded to our outreach and are included in this Spotlight.

ABOUT “DATA CHAMPIONS SPOTLIGHTS”

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MEET THE DATA CHAMPIONS

Organization: Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics (BEAM)
Founded: 2011
Staffing: Approximately 12 FTE, with 3 who work specifically on data and others assisting
Web: https://www.beammath.org/
Facebook: facebook.com/beammath
Twitter: @BEAMmathHQ
Instagram: beammathnyc

Organization: Emerging Scholars
Founded: 2002
Staffing: Approximately 5 FTE, with 2 FTE working with data
Web: https://www.emergingscholarsprogram.org/
Facebook: facebook.com/EmergingScholarsDC/
Twitter: @EmergingScholar
Instagram: emergingscholars
**Organization**: Trinity Education for Excellence Program (TEEP)
**Founded**: 2000
**Staffing**: 3 FTE, all of whom help to compile attendance data, demographics data, evaluation tools for internal program adjustment, and external reporting
**Web**: https://trinityinspires.org/programs/teep
**Facebook**: facebook.com/TrinityBostonFoundation
**Twitter**: @TrinityInspires
**Instagram**: teep.boston

Approximately 120 students in grades 7-12 served annually

**Organization**: Young Eisner Scholars (YES)
**Founded**: 1999
**Staffing**: Approximately 12 FTE; all 4 program directors, the executive director, and the grant support staff all work with data, but there is no one specific role dedicated to the task
**Web**: http://www.yesscholars.org/
**Facebook**: facebook.com/YoungEisnerScholars/
**Twitter**: @YESScholars
**Instagram**: yesscholars

Approximately 395 students in grades 7-12 and into college served annually
Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics (BEAM): Start early! We meet our kids in 6th grade and we start talking right away about the cost of college attendance. The early message is that some colleges will be very affordable (even free!) for low-income students who can get in. Collect the data you need to tell the story: we ask for copies of taxes in 7th grade as an admissions criterion, which then allows us to understand what their expected cost of college attendance may be. Families can also submit documentation stating they don't file taxes.

In terms of collecting data: don't trust others to do this work! We're a Community-Based Organization (CBO), so students also get college advice from their schools. In our first years, we were shocked by how many 12th graders still hadn't heard of the CSS Profile by February. Now, we dole out information early and often: when to file your FAFSA, what to do if you have a non-custodial parent who doesn't contribute to your education, how to manage email to make sure you don't miss verification notices. We use email, in-person meetings, and mass texting to make sure the 12th grade cohort knows these things.

Emerging Scholars Program: Since 2015, we have produced a survey of each applicant, the admission results and the difference between the Parent Offer to Pay and the Financial Aid Award. The survey includes 22 other points of data that are also tabulated. Household income, number of dependents, and siblings or parents in tuition-based educational programming are all included, and help to provide a more complete picture.
Young Eisner Scholars (YES): We rely on self-reporting from our students to provide the initial overview of their financial aid awards. We then review financial aid notifications with each student individually in-person. Once students have finalized their college decision, we have each student and family complete a YES College Form that clearly outlines their financial aid award and breaks down funding sources (grants, loans, and outside scholarships) to clearly map out the funding available to each student and total out-of-pocket costs.

Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics (BEAM): A big thing for us was setting a target for "the right amount of debt". Yes, 0 would be best, but that's just not going to happen every time. So, we set the marker at $8,000/year, which is the gap in aid for a NYC resident planning to live on campus at a State University of New York (SUNY) if their Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is 0. $8,000/year is a manageable amount of debt, and going to SUNY makes a lot of sense for a lot of kids. We do have students choose packages with more debt, but we make sure they know this is a risky choice.

With regards to tracking: you have to see the paper! Students are confused by aid, so this is a great opportunity to help them while also creating records. Photocopy every offer letter they bring in for an advising session, and use it to help students know what to expect next year. We even made our own slide deck for our ‘Summer College Bootcamp’ for rising 11th/12th graders that breaks down offer letters and shows how inconsistent and confusing they are. Obviously, student names are removed! Once you do this, the tracking is pretty easy, and students and families will show up for these meetings with the tools to understand what is going on.

Another lesson we’ve learned is that it’s important to make sure students don't spend too much time chasing $500 scholarships. The best financial aid comes from the colleges, so they should put most of their focus on big scholarships (JKCF, Questbridge, Posse, Gates) and their college applications. We explain that the time for scholarships of $2,000 or less is after they get into college, when they’ll have more time to spend on more applications.

Lastly, schedule fun events throughout 11th/12th grade to get students who are out of touch to re-engage. You never know what problem you're going to solve just because you see someone face to face!
Emerging Scholars Program: Many of our practices result from one crucial best practice: be sure to have an agreement with the family for full disclosure of information! Ensure the parents that this information is helpful to the other entities as they need to know the issues that families face when applying and attending these schools. Reassure the parents that this information is secured and guarded in anonymity. Finally, offer an opportunity for families to view other anonymous data as well.

Trinity Education for Excellence Program: We have sustained a partnership with Inversant (formerly F.U.E.L.) which is a savings and match opportunity for our high school participants. Monthly learning circles offer guidance throughout the college process including FAFSA completion, college application process, transfer process, and much more. Students are eligible throughout their high school career and anything saved in their account is matched up to $1,000. The partnership with Inversant has been invaluable to our program participants and parents in doing all they can to prepare for college.

Young Eisner Scholars (YES): We start talking about college costs with our students as early as 9th grade and really discuss the college return on investment. A majority of our students attend independent schools with amazing, comprehensive financial aid, and we are very upfront that college costs will be more significant. Our families have high school tuition payments as low as $50/month that cover all fees, meals, and transportation, so there is major sticker-shock when students receive financial aid awards for college—even our students who receive “full-ride” college financial aid awards often have additional expenses that ultimately cost families more than a year of their reduced high school tuitions. Students are encouraged to apply to colleges that meet 100% of need, and we generally discourage students from taking out more than $15,000/year in loans.

Having students initially self-report their financial aid awards compared to the total cost of attendance has helped our organization (and students) obtain a clearer picture about the actual cost of attendance for each college. Students often utilize this information to make their college decision. We also help students and families carefully analyze financial aid packages for three key expenses: 1) travel costs; 2) books and supplies; 3) health insurance. Each school words their award letters differently, so we help students factor in what specific expenses are covered. Health insurance alone can add an

“We encourage students to appeal awards and we help write appeal letters—if it initially doesn’t seem feasible we reach out to ask for additional funding through a narrative and data-driven approach.”
additional $2000 to the cost of attendance, so we ask students and families to find out that information before we examine the financial aid award.

We also have students break down their awards by source of funding and this is so helpful to see the big picture - what may seem like a great financial aid package on paper may actually be a large parent loan and limited grant funding. We encourage students to appeal awards and we help write appeal letters - if it initially doesn’t seem feasible we reach out to ask for additional funding through a narrative and data-driven approach. Lastly, we have a master list of scholarships for our students and we ask each student apply to at least 3 scholarships. Many of these are regional and smaller-dollar scholarships, but our student sees how every bit helps and a $500 scholarship can make a dent in travel or textbook costs.

**QUESTION 3**

When you consider the students you've worked with in navigating financial aid packages and post-secondary options, what student story (or stories) come(s) to mind that you would like to share with the NPEA community? Putting a "face to the data" is always helpful to paint a picture.

**Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics (BEAM):** Abdoulaye attended a high school we thought we trusted with a major college counseling component. When April 30 of his senior year rolled around, we hadn't heard back about college, so we called to ask: where were you admitted? He said he was deciding between GWU, Syracuse, and Howard, but he didn't know what his financial aid would be for Syracuse and Howard. There was some verification he had missed earlier and he wasn't going to learn his aid package until May, after he had to make a decision on GWU. Abdoulaye was okay with GWU and his annual cost of attendance was only $800, but his deposit was $1,000, and he knew he couldn't afford that. May 1 was a Monday so we spent ~2 hours calling financial aid at each school. Howard didn't answer. Syracuse said they could extend the deadline to June 1 to decide, but that meant he would have to turn down GWU with no guarantee he could afford Syracuse. I knew GWU would negotiate the deposit, so I called financial aid who told me to call admissions. Admissions said that if I sent an email and copied Abdoulaye, they would drop the deposit to $150. I called him during his lunch hour and presented the info. He called his mom and they paid the $150 to GWU.
The next year, we completely redesigned our tracking procedures. In particular, we now say to students who claim they are getting their advising from their high school, "It's great that your high school is providing this support, but it's often a good idea to have a second opinion. Can we hear what you're up to at this stage?" We hope we’ve avoided many situations like Abdoulaye’s, where students end up with restricted options because they didn’t know what they needed to do to get their aid.

**Emerging Scholars Program:** As a short example, we had one student turn down two full scholarships, one of which included a fully-funded double major and a master’s degree, in order to attend Columbia University - where no financial assistance was offered. You can do all of the work to provide affordable options for students, and they may still choose to go a different direction.

**Trinity Education for Excellence Program:** We had a high school senior who was dead-set on attending Simmons College. They had what she was looking for in terms of the program of study, but the financial aid offer was too low for her. Despite feeling disappointed, she took advice from our staff team and other supporters to attend UMass Boston for her Freshman Year. She received a full scholarship and is now halfway through her second-year with no debt. This financial stability has given her the ability to focus on her studies and save money while working two part-time jobs. Her story reminds all of our students that the path to higher education is rarely a straight line and that each opportunity may present a compromise. She hopes to transfer in her third year or attend Simmons for graduate studies.

**Young Eisner Scholars (YES):** Our students have high ambition, a great depth of leadership skills, and the work ethic to accomplish their goals. The high cost of post-secondary education, however, often leaves students dejected, discouraged, or delayed in completing their studies. For many of our students, they are the first to attend college and lack the insider know-how of navigating the financial aid process and deciphering the packages they do receive. Our individual family meetings help diminish sticker-shock and let our families know they have a source of support when it comes to understanding financial aid and college costs. We had a family that was convinced their student could not attend his top school, a private liberal arts college. They balked at the overall cost of
attendance and wanted him to attend a state school and live off-campus with family friends. We were able to work with the family to break down the cost of attendance at both schools, which showed that the private college ultimately would be the cheaper option. The student’s initial financial aid award had a gap that was more than the family was comfortable with, but we were able to write an appeal to the school and helped our student apply to several smaller scholarships to further close the gap. He is now attending his dream school and is learning a great deal about financial responsibility along the way.

**QUESTION 4**

Is there anything else you would like NPEA or its members to know about your organization or school’s work with data, and/or specifically with students as they pursue two- or four-year degrees?

**Emerging Scholars:** Employment is an essential part of the financial aid process. Please be sure Scholars can find other means to generate income while in school - work-study only does so much.

**SPECIAL THANKS**

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