

Economic Mobility Catalog: Case Study

College access and completion supports: Boston, MA



K-12 Education



Post-Secondary Enrollment & Graduation

MORE ABOUT THE STRATEGY USED IN THIS CASE STUDY: [Guidance and supports for post-secondary students](#), [College access and readiness supports](#)

At-a-Glance



Summary

- In 2008, public and civic leaders in Boston launched Success Boston, a city-wide effort to address low college completion rates among Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates. At the time, only 35 percent of BPS graduates enrolled in and completed college. The completion rates for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students were even lower, at 28, 24, and 14 percent, respectively.
- To address this issue, Success Boston several non-profits to deliver college access and completion support programs to BPS students. Bottom Line was chosen as a primary service provider. The program advises low-income students on applying to, selecting, and enrolling in a college. Once in college, Bottom Line provides individualized academic, social, and career services to students.
- Bottom Line is successful because it builds strong relationships with partner colleges; secures funding from public, philanthropic, and private sources; partners with schools and community organizations to boost student engagement; demonstrates the program's effectiveness through data; and focuses on partnering with schools with high guidance counselor-to-student ratios.

Results and Accomplishments

<div>8%</div> <div>Bottom Line participants are 8 percentage points more likely than their peers to graduate from a four-year college (55% vs. 47%).</div>	<div>5%</div> <div>Bottom Line participants are 5 percentage points more likely (87%) to enroll in any college and 9 percentage points more likely (79%) to enroll in a four-year college than their peers.</div>	<div>78%</div> <div>Average college graduation rate of Bottom Line participants in Massachusetts</div>
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- **Serving thousands of students:** Bottom Line has grown from serving 25 students in one Boston high school in 1997 to serving over 3,000 students across the entire city today, a significant share of the total number of college-bound students from lower-income backgrounds in the city.
- **Collaborating closely with schools and colleges:** The program has developed close partnerships with public schools and colleges across the state of Massachusetts, enabling them to reach the students most in need, orient them towards colleges that are a good fit, and support them through graduation.
- **Boosting college access and persistence:** In recent years, Bottom Line has maintained strong outcomes on key performance indicators. Of all Bottom Line students in Massachusetts, 93 percent commit to a specific college before graduating high school, and 94 percent of students persist into their second year.

Overview



What was the challenge?

- **Low college enrollment and completion rates:** In the late 1990s and early 2000s, only 35 percent of students who graduated from Boston Public Schools (BPS) enrolled in and completed college.
- **Racial and socioeconomic disparities:** During this period, only one out of every seven low-income BPS students who started college would go on to finish, and only about one in four Black and Hispanic BPS graduates would go on to complete college within seven years.
- **Education increasingly key to opportunity:** With an increasing percentage of jobs in Boston requiring at least some post-secondary training, without action, lower-income communities of color would be left further and further behind.

What was the solution?

- **Building a coalition:** In 2008, public and civic leaders in Boston recognized the need for programming and supports to help students from lower-income families navigate the pathway to and through college. Led by then-Mayor Thomas Menino, the Success Boston initiative was formed. The initiative sought to significantly increase the number of BPS graduates who graduated from college.
- **Selecting an evidence-based program:** Bottom Line, a college access and completion support program, started in Boston in 1997. In the decade prior to Success Boston, the program had demonstrated strong results in helping college-bound students from lower-income backgrounds apply to, enroll in, and graduate from college. It was chosen as one of the primary service delivery partners for the Success Boston initiative.
- **Helping students apply a choose a college:** Bottom Line focuses on supporting first-generation students from lower-income families in the academic middle ground. Each participant is provided with an Advisor, who guides them in creating college lists, completing their applications, applying for and analyzing financial aid, and making an informed decision on where to enroll.
- **Providing supports once enrolled:** Once students are in college, Bottom Line continues to provide individualized academic, social, and career support on campus.

What factors drove success?

- **Leveraging existing school counselors:** Targeting public high schools in Boston that have particularly high guidance-counselor-to-student ratios ensures that Bottom Line is reaching students who are most in need of assistance.
- **Diverse funding streams:** Maintaining a healthy balance of public, philanthropic, and private funding has provided Bottom Line with the ability to serve every student for up to seven years, starting from when they are seniors in high school to when they graduate college and six months beyond.
- **Recruiting engaged students:** Students' early-stage participation is key to their success in the program, and established relationships with public schools, community-based organizations, and other referral partners help ensure that participants are fully engaged from day one.
- **Relationships with local colleges:** Close relationships with partner colleges ensure that Bottom Line advisors are able to help students find colleges well suited to their individual academic, social, and financial needs.
- **Using data to improve and demonstrate results:** A deep organizational commitment to data and evidence have helped build trust among public and philanthropic funders, maintained program effectiveness, and enabled continuous improvement.



Timeline

PROGRAM LAUNCH

1997

Bottom Line is founded

Dave Borgal, a former guidance counselor, opens an office on the first floor of a high school in Boston. He works with 25 students and all get accepted to college. By 2000, the program serves 250 students.

2003

Greg Johnson becomes Bottom Line's Executive Director

Bottom Line doubles size of College Access program, formalizes college student advising, and experiments with larger caseload. Program scales to serve 880 students and has 265 alumni by 2007.

2008

Success Boston launches

Led by Mayor Thomas Menino, public and civic sector leaders come together to create Success Boston, an initiative focused on college access and completion for high school students in Boston Public Schools. Bottom Line is chosen as one of the primary service providers for the initiative.

2012

Bottom Line begins major growth campaign

Bottom Line begins a \$5 million growth campaign for their operations in Boston, aiming specifically to serve larger numbers of students in the city's lowest-income neighborhoods and triple overall participation. During this period, the program receives a \$2.5 million grant from the Lewis Family Foundation.

2014

Bottom Line begins randomized controlled trial

To rigorously assess the effectiveness of their model, Bottom Line partners with Dr. Ben Castleman of the University of Virginia to conduct an evaluation. Initial results are published in 2016 and demonstrate a substantial positive effect on college enrollment and persistence.

2015

Bottom Line partners with State Street Boston WINS

The Boston Workforce Investment Network (Boston WINS), a \$26 million philanthropic initiative funded by State Street, is created to help prepare Boston youth for the workforce. Bottom Line is chosen as one of five nonprofit partners to provide a continuum of services for students to graduate from high school, complete post-secondary education, and gain high-quality employment.

OCTOBER 2021

Randomized control trial follow-up results published

Results from the large RCT, which was conducted in Boston, Worcester (MA), and New York City, show that Bottom Line participants are 8 percentage points more likely to graduate from a four-year college than their peers. Results were consistent across sites.

Implementation Process



How were community members engaged?

- **Low college completion rates:** In the late 1990s and early 2000s, only 35 percent of graduates of Boston's public high schools went on to complete college.
- **Identifying the problem:** In 2008, then-Mayor Thomas Menino and Boston business and civic leaders identify the need for new services to help high school graduates enroll in and complete college.
- **Forming a coalition:** The initiative, known as Success Boston, funds several providers to deliver coaching and support services to college-bound students from lower-income families. Bottom Line is chosen as one of the delivery partners for this strategy.

How was the strategy designed?

- **Support along the whole college journey:** Bottom Line's model addresses college enrollment, persistence, and completion, with supports for students starting in their senior year of high school and continuing through college for up to six years.
- **Comprehensive supports at each stage:** The model has two distinct phases: Access and Success. In the Access phase, every student receives a dedicated, highly-trained Advisor who works with them to solidify their pathway to a college that will be a good fit academically, socially, and financially. The Success phase begins once students are in college. Advisors provide support in picking a major, accumulating applicable credits, remaining in good academic standing, developing career interests, gaining career-relevant work experience, renewing financial aid, managing the cost of college, and other general life skills.
- **Centering relationships:** Advisors develop deep relationships with their students, and the trust and support that comes from these relationships undergirds the effectiveness of the model.

How was the approach funded?

- **Balancing public and philanthropic funding:** Through Success Boston, Bottom Line received a mix of philanthropic and public funding. When Success Boston was awarded a \$2.7 million dollar grant from the White House Social Innovation Fund, Bottom Line was the single largest recipient of these funds. In 2012, as Bottom Line sought to triple enrollment and serve larger numbers of students in Boston's lowest-income neighborhoods, it received a \$2.5 million grant from the Lewis Family Foundation.

- **Leveraging state dollars:** The program has received state funding in five of the past six years.

How was the plan implemented?

- **Scaling up with increased funding:** In 2007, the year before Success Boston launched, Bottom Line served a total of 880 students in its Access and Success programs. With funding from Success Boston, Bottom Line was able to expand to serve 1,100 students in Massachusetts. To accommodate this growth, the program hired additional staff and moved to a larger office space.
- **Building outreach capacity:** In 2012, as Bottom Line sought to triple enrollment and reach more students in Boston's lowest-income neighborhoods, the program hired a community engagement manager to lead outreach and build stronger connections to communities in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan.
- **Partnering with BPS and local nonprofits:** The Boston WINs initiative further strengthened Bottom Line's ability to reach students, linking the program with several other non-profit partners and creating more coordinated action with Boston Public Schools.

How was the approach measured and refined?

- **Independent evaluation:** Bottom Line began an independent, randomized control trial in 2014. In October 2021, results from the RCT demonstrated strong results: participation increased graduation from a four-year college by 8 percentage points (55% vs. 47% for the control group).
- **Using metrics to identify student needs:** At every phase of a student's participation, the organization tracks a range of measures to ensure participants can receive support and overcome obstacles.
- **Setting measurable and meaningful KPIs:** Bottom Line's key performance indicators include: students committing to a college by June 1; students committing to an affordable college option; college persistence; 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates; students graduating with less than \$31,000 in debt; and students employed or in graduate school within 6 months of graduation.

Acknowledgments

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Learn more

- [PDF of RFA case study of Bottom Line](#)
- [Bottom Line program website](#)
- [US Department of Education study review of Bottom Line](#)
- [Barr and Castleman, "Advising Students To and Through College: Experimental Evidence from the Bottom Line Advising Program," Bottom Line, 2016](#)
- [Success Boston website](#)
- [Overview of State Street's Boston Workforce Investment Network \(Boston WINs\)](#)