A PATH FORWARD

working together to enhance college opportunity and success rates for Taos students

Bridges Project for Education, in collaboration with Taos Municipal Schools, UNM-Taos, and i2i Institute, and with funding provided by Hispanics in Philanthropy.
COLLEGE: the what, why, and how of it for Taos students

Taos is rich in human and natural resources, and helping our family members, friends, and neighbors live fulfilling lives has always been a part of our mutual ethic.

How does college fit into that way of life?

We’ve heard it countless times: college isn’t for everybody. It’s expensive. It’s confusing. Not all students are cut out for the academic track.

And yet, numerous studies show that attaining a college degree provides students increasingly vital opportunities to shape their futures. We’ve heard from Taos students themselves that they believe college can help them achieve their career goals. And they’ve told us (in overwhelming numbers) that they believe their parents want them to go to college.

Even for the most dedicated students, negotiating the thorny road toward a college degree can present challenging and sometimes insurmountable obstacles. Discouraged or lacking resources, many turn back before reaching their goals.

We believe all students should have equal access to the benefits of higher education. For students who want to go to college, we want to see them admitted to, enrolled in, and graduated from the institution that best suits their needs.

The purpose of this document is to share results from a recent grant-funded collaboration between Bridges Project for Education, Taos Municipal Schools, and UNM-Taos. The project’s aim has been to strengthen the capacity of the existing infrastructure that supports Hispanic and first-generation students’ access to higher education, whether for academic or vocational pathways.

Long term, we hope to spark conversation about how we as a community can best aid Taos students in attaining their educational goals.
+ Taos College-Going Patterns
Census data indicates that Taos is on par with the national average for educational attainment. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that Taos students may not have the same educational opportunities as those educated elsewhere.

Access to higher education is a social justice issue that Bridges Project for Education has been pursuing since its inception in 1997.

The 2010 census reports that 28.8% of Taos County residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, roughly the same as the national average and higher than for the state as a whole (25.6%). Since 1997, when Bridges Project for Education was founded in Taos, that percentage has been growing. Evidence suggests, however, that this trend reflects a steady influx of higher-educated residents, not a gain in educational attainment for local students.

Some troubling statistics suggest a low rate of college completion among students who rise to college from Taos schools. It’s not surprising. Our high rate of first generation students (the first in their family to attend college) puts them at greater risk for obstacles that challenge their progress at virtually every step of the way.

Recognizing that Taos County’s future is directly linked with our ability to educate our young people, Bridges Project for Education was formed to provide more opportunities for students to attend college or vocational school. Access to higher education for students from all backgrounds can provide a means toward breaking negative cycles and achieving practical, positive change in their lives.

Bridges has worked individually with over 2,000 students and their families, helping them research colleges, write application essays, register for college entrance exams and locate financial aid and scholarships. Helping students gain entrance to college is one part of the process. Helping them complete their degrees and leverage the advantages of that accomplishment is another, crucial element of social justice—one that will take the efforts of the community to address.
EDUCATIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

How important is college? What effect will higher education have on our students’ lives in the long run?

Current research reveals three things:

1. Attaining a bachelor’s degree confers significant economic advantage.

2. First-generation and Hispanic students, nationwide, have lower rates of educational attainment than the general population.

3. High educational aspirations, among other indicators, directly correlate with college persistence and completion.

Although the majority of Taos High School students declare their intention to attend college directly upon graduation, retention and persistence rates at UNM-Taos—the campus most convenient to Taos students—are significantly lower than those of comparably-sized institutions.

Taos students are being effectively recruited to college from high school. Once enrolled, problems arise in their ability to remain in school and to achieve their educational goals. This has important ramifications, not just for the individual students, but for the community as a whole. In a county where poverty rates exceed the state average, this focus on higher education seems instrumental to increasing opportunity and improving the economic infrastructure.

The roots of this problem may extend deeper than the challenges students face once in college. In order to examine issues around academic preparedness, family and work obligations, financial resources, knowledge about college, and other factors, we conducted a battery of surveys that revealed some interesting trends. We’ll share that info with you later in this document.

First, though, we examined the data that was already available to show us college-going patterns in Taos.
WHAT WE KNOW

By examining diverse sources of existing data, we gleaned some important insights. The graphic to the right shows some of the sources we consulted and a few of the data types we were able to access.

Among other things, we learned:

1. As many as two thirds of Taos students are considered first-generation with respect to college.

2. Most Taos students who complete high school do intend to enroll in college.

3. Pell-eligibility (federal financial aid for low-income students) is high among Taos students.

4. Students seek help in navigating the complex college admissions process.

5. College completion rates (degree granted, or transfer to 4-yr college) are low at UNM-Taos, and may be low for Taos students as a group.

**SOURCES OF EXISTING DATA**

*IPEDS database, UNM factbook, research literature, advocacy group literature*

- Nationwide comparisons among academic institutions
- Data regarding persistence and retention at UNM-T
- Graduation and transfer rates from UNM-T

*ADDITIONAL SOURCES*

- Intended college (proxy)
- Student demographics
- Student academic achievement in high school
- High school graduation rates

*DATA ON FIRST-GENERATION AND HISPANIC STUDENTS*

- Educational attainment levels by geographic region
- Data on first-generation and Hispanic students
- Challenges faced in similar communities

*ADVOCACY GROUP LITERATURE*

- Student attitudes toward college
- Needs of traditional and non-traditional-aged students
- College entry requirements and preparedness standards

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Slidedoc prepared by i2i Institute, Taos, NM
WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Collecting, archiving, analyzing, and sharing data (and relevant insights) formed the major focus of this collaboration. Knowing more will give us the tools to develop and implement strategies to help our students reach their educational goals. As the project progressed, we found that we lacked vital information. We developed instruments to allow us increased access.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where, and at what rate, do Taos residents enroll in college?</td>
<td>Proxy data from Taos Municipal Schools records gives us some understanding. We need a clear and accurate system to track Taos students' college enrollment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges do Taos students face at college?</td>
<td>The UNM-T survey and interviews with community stakeholders offer information. The pre-college survey addresses students’ anticipated concerns. We need to gather information from students who attend other colleges, both two-year and four-year institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What resources facilitate the progress of Taos students through college?</td>
<td>Same as above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where, and at what rate, do Taos students graduate from college?</td>
<td>Again, we need a clear and accurate system that tracks Taos students' college progress and completion rates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what rate do Taos college graduates return to the community to make use of their degrees and skills?</td>
<td>We have some anecdotal reports, but no formal means of gathering this information.</td>
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Overview of HIP Project
DEVELOPING THE NETWORK: PARTNERS

This project, funded by Hispanics in Philanthropy with additional funds provided by Bread for the Journey, is a collaboration between Bridges Project for Education, Taos Municipal Schools, and the University of New Mexico-Taos. i2i Institute, a Taos-based research and evaluation firm, contributed technical support and analysis.

The advantage of having three major Taos organizations share data, brainstorm ideas, contribute resources, and offer expertise allowed the project to advance rapidly.

We began by engaging representatives from the project team in a discussion of desired outcomes. Working together, we developed a strategic plan for the partnership.

Bridges Project spearheaded the effort, identifying goals, establishing a timeline, coordinating analysis, and assuming fiscal and reporting responsibilities.

TMS offered the support of upper level administration. They allowed access to sophomore students for survey purposes, generously shared other data, and agreed to survey senior students for comparison in the future.

The Office of Student Success at UNM-T was instrumental in identifying existing data collection strategies. UNM instructors offered the survey to successive sessions of the mandatory UNIV-101 class.

The three organizations serve different but overlapping groups of students, and it continues to be a valuable experience to share information and ideas while working toward a common goal.

The primary partners in the network
**ESTABLISHING A PROJECT TIMELINE**

**Phase One: Initial Network Development**

- **Y1 - 2012**: Create, fine-tune, and conduct surveys and other instruments; gather and analyze data; develop reports to share results.
  - Separate surveys of first-year UNM-T students enrolled in a UNIV-101 class and of sophomore students at Taos High School provided data on intentions, attitudes, and experiences of local college and pre-college students.

- **Y2 - 2013**: Finalize reports on data collection and determine next steps for broadening base and strengthening and sustaining project aims. Two iterations of the Sophomore Survey and four of the UNIV-101 survey provided ongoing data, and an MOU with TMS established a protocol for sharing additional relevant student data.

- **August 2014**: Conduct wider meeting in August. Create brochure and one page pdf to share results with community; These documents will emphasize next steps and encourage network development. By sharing project results with the community, we hope to spark interest in continuing the work spearheaded by the Hispanics in Philanthropy grant.

- **July 2014**: Prepare slidedoc to present project findings and define next steps.
  - Our presentation will include a brief account of the need for and history of the project and will focus on what we’ve learned. It will address next steps, including network building, action steps, and engaging the wider community.

**Phase Two: What Develops?**

- **FUTURE**: Formalizing the network and actively involving the broader community will depend on additional funding and more commitment from core partners. Repeating the THS survey when sophomores are in their final year of high school will provide comparison data to chart changes over time.
CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Take a mental walk in their shoes.

Staff from i2i Institute asked local professionals engaged in education and youth development to help identify potential factors related to students’ college success. What facilitators contribute to keeping people in college and on course to reach their goals? What barriers stand in their way?

On the plus side, people mentioned: connecting to a ‘community’ within the school; supportive family structures; academic preparedness; and individual qualities like personal discipline, time-management skills, and a sense of inner resourcefulness.

Drawbacks included financial constraints; family obligations; reluctance to use resources available to them at college; and family or community resistance to college.

“How much do people in the community really want their kids to go to school? Where are they going to go with their degrees?” one interviewee asked.

Staff at TMS commented that the majority of the students that they see returning (leaving college without completing) do so “because of financial problems; or they’re partying too much and didn’t make their grades. They’re too quick to live off campus, and they need help with both time and money management.”
COLLECTING DATA FROM STUDENTS

What are students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward college? Using the interview data as a guide, we constructed two surveys to query college and pre-college students directly.

The collaboration yielded some exciting opportunities and compelling results. Amie Chavez-Aguilar at UNM-T invited us to survey students in the university skills intro class, and over the course of four semesters we gathered data from a total of 146 current college students.

The team at Taos Municipal Schools permitted Bridges Project to survey the sophomore class at Taos High School, and in 2013 and 2014 294 students responded to the questionnaire. These students will be re-surveyed as seniors.

Although the surveys differed substantially, the indicators were designed to compare similarities and differences in attitude and perception between students anticipating college and those already enrolled.

What students expected to find challenging about college, and what they actually encountered, showed a significant difference.
The HIP project has three essential components: collecting data, analyzing it, and sharing the insights it yields with the partners. Like any complex system, though, these steps happen not consecutively but concurrently. New data continues to inform the developing model.

Different data sets require different methods of approach. Survey data was collected via paper questionnaires (the sophomore survey at THS) and online (the UNIV-101 survey at UNM-T). Both required an electronic software system to provide initial analysis and generate charts. Quantitative data collected by Bridges Project and shared by TMS was archived in an alternate software system, and qualitative data in yet another.

Finding funding to create a database adequate to the complex demands of these multiple data sets is an urgent goal. Continued data collection, analysis, and distribution will depend on successfully negotiating this need.
What We’ve Learned
PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE

Taos High School sophomores have a strong sense that attending college can help their career ambitions, and most are confident they have the potential to succeed in college. They believe their parents want them to go to college. More than three quarters of students talk with their parents about college.

The biggest fear students have concerning college is financial: how will they pay for it?

For Taos High School sophomores, college is definitely in their plans. A whopping 95% believe college can help them reach their career goals, and 93% believe their parents want them to attend. The surveys show them to be a confident bunch who feel academically prepared and consider themselves ready for the time demands college will present.

What weighs on their minds, however, is the thought of paying for college: 21% describe themselves as “strongly concerned” about this aspect, with another 32% claiming they are “somewhat concerned.” Only 6% feel “strongly confident” in this regard.

According to a report recently released by the ACT, these perceptions mirror those of low-income students surveyed nationwide. Although low-income students aspire more overtly to attend college, fewer of them actually enroll. Of those who do, the degree completion rate is much lower. The problem, the study asserts, lies less in paying for college and more in college readiness—a blend of academic and personal preparedness that will help students weather the challenges that college presents.
WHERE TO GO?

Many high school students anticipate choosing out-of-state options over a New Mexico college. There’s considerable confusion, however, over the difference between 2-year and 4-year schools.

Type of school

The distinction between attending a four-year college (earning a bachelor’s degree) and attending a two-year college or vocational program is not always clear to students. "By spring of their sophomore year, most students are not certain why they would choose one over another," said Sue Goldberg, of Bridges Project. More than a third of the students reported that they have not heard their teachers discuss college with them by this time.

Students who expect to attend a four-year college appear more committed to that specific intention than those who want to pursue alternative routes, as the chart above reflects. Still, students’ lack of clarity around options suggests a widespread confusion about how college works—as well as an undeveloped sense of their place in it.

Location of School

More students expect to remain in New Mexico than to attend college out of state, and more students selected The University of New Mexico Main Campus as a "very likely" or "somewhat likely" choice from among the in-state options. Still, 193 students declared themselves "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to attend a college out of state—24 more than for any single in-state option.

The number of students who profess themselves “very likely” to attend a college out of state are more apt to have a parent who completed college. These students seem to be more confident of their abilities, less concerned about potential barriers, more actively supported in their college aspirations by their parents and teachers, and more ambitious in their aims.
BARRIERS TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

Of the students surveyed at UNM-T, 67% agreed that “managing my time” was a challenge for them, with 23%—the largest share—declaring it the most challenging thing about college.

1. **Time Management**
   More than half (57%) of UNIV-101 survey respondents remarked on the challenge of balancing family responsibilities with college. For 15% of those surveyed, this was the most challenging aspect. Students older than 25 were most affected by this; those aged 15-19 felt this difficulty the least.

2. **Balancing Family**
   Conversely, 60% of sophomores surveyed at Taos High School indicated feeling "very confident" or "somewhat confident" about their ability to manage their time while at college, and only 20% reported feeling "somewhat concerned" or "strongly concerned" about that aspect of college. The UNIV-101 survey results suggest that college freshmen may be taken aback by the difficulty of balancing the demands of college with their new freedom.

3. **Balancing Work**
   Balancing work responsibilities offered the greatest challenge to those in the 20-24 year age range. Nearly 26% of all respondents found this the most challenging aspect; for those aged 20-24, 35% found it most challenging. Of all respondents, 53% found this aspect challenging. Only 17% of Taos High School sophomores were concerned about their ability to handle this challenge.

4. **Managing Finances**
   The biggest worry for the high school sophomores we surveyed was paying for college. For students surveyed at UNM-T, managing their finances presented a challenge to 41%, and was the most challenging aspect for only 10%. While many THS students will attend more expensive colleges and face larger bills for tuition and fees, financial aid for lower income students may help offset that concern for some.
FACILITATORS TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

Most students surveyed indicate that they feel well supported by family and friends, and ambitious in their aims to further their higher education.

Additional information and a more effective database will teach us more about the structures and services that can best help Taos students.

Nationwide studies suggest indicators that correspond with degree completion:

- high educational aspirations shared by students and parents;
- successful completion during high school of a rigorous core curriculum;
- academic and social support systems for college students;
- full-time, continuous enrollment; and
- on-campus residence.

Our surveys have shown high levels of student satisfaction with pre-college counseling at Bridges Project for Education, as well as high satisfaction among students using resources available at UNM-T. Still, not all students know about or choose to access the available help.

With the development of a memorandum of understanding and a database that can compile and cross-reference data from Taos Municipal Schools, UNM-T, and Bridges Project records, we anticipate being able to zero in on the most effective facilitators to college success. This analysis can inform program development and implementation across all three institutions.
ARE OUR STUDENTS PREPARED?

Where We Are Now

Our high school students appear cautiously optimistic about their college prospects. Most feel they want to attend, but are anxious about what it will cost. They seem to underestimate many of the other challenges college presents as well as the level of independence and resourcefulness it can require. Many start school, but do not complete their degree.

Where We’d Like to Be

We want our students to be prepared—academically, financially, and personally—for the demands of college. We want them admitted to the most appropriate institution for their needs, and to have access to (and use) the various kinds of support that can help them advance toward their degree. Once graduated, we want them welcomed back into skilled jobs.

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<th>Academic Preparedness</th>
<th>Financial Considerations</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Time management skills</td>
<td>Early advisement regarding high school course choice</td>
<td>Money management skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingness to use college support services</td>
<td>Successful completion of high school core curriculum</td>
<td>Access to financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive social structures</td>
<td>Fulfillment of college entry requirements</td>
<td>Knowledge of college cost differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High educational aspirations</td>
<td>Good match of college to student</td>
<td>Awareness of student debt obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual motivations</td>
<td>Academic guidance and mentoring</td>
<td>Lottery scholarship: time-sensitive</td>
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Slidedoc prepared by i2i Institute, Taos, NM
+ Next Steps
Continued use of surveys to track changes over time

Monitoring changes in students as they mature in the community over time will allow us to see how attitudes toward college evolve. If we can continue to survey students, we’ll be able to gauge relative college readiness and track outcomes in higher education.

Regularly scheduled sessions to share data and results

The collaboration fostered by this project is one significant outcome on its own. Joining forces regularly to share data and ideas and to reflect on the process and progress will result in a wider resource base and shorter feedback loop, leading to faster, more effective solutions.

Need for database to store all information

Having a comprehensive, queryable database capable of storing all relevant data and generating nuanced reports will help make the data useful and accessible.
WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT POSITIVE COLLEGE-GOING PATTERNS

It takes a community-wide effort to support our students on their path to—and through—college. From encouraging, informing, and assisting young students, to providing concrete assistance to those already in college, to generating jobs for new college graduates, the work requires a diverse set of skills and resources.

Is This the Time?
Groups of Taos residents have come together at various times before to discuss the opportunities for and challenges facing our college-bound students. Now more than ever, research confirms the urgency of this mission.

A Network of Interested Professionals
Bridges Project for Education, UNM-Taos, and Taos Municipal Schools are just three of several local organizations concerned with helping our students succeed in higher education. Sharing data and ideas can speed the process and increase our effectiveness.

Building the Road Brick by Brick
A data-informed perspective can help us develop effective and appropriate programming to help students with their college aspirations.

No One Organization Can Do It Alone
Helping Taos students prepare for, be admitted to, select, finance, and succeed in college is a job for all of us. Sharing the load can make it feasible.
CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Our partners, consultants, and current students have made numerous suggestions for pathways and strategies toward change.

Let’s continue to brainstorm workable ideas, and think too about the people who can help with this long-range goal.

Continued use of surveys; regularly scheduled meetings between partners in the current collaboration; and finding funding for the development of a flexible, queryable database are our most immediate aims. We’re glad for the chance to share our findings with you, and welcome the opportunity to take the conversation into the community.
A FINAL THOUGHT

We all want our students well-equipped to face the future. If college is in their plans, let’s help them succeed at it.

Not all students do want to advance to college. If they’re reluctant or unprepared; if they’ve got a different direction in mind; if they need some time off, first, we shouldn’t create an atmosphere of anxiety or disapproval around their decision. As one community member told us, “Students should study when they’re ready, not have college crammed down their throats when they aren’t interested in doing it.”

For many Taos students, though, college is an appropriate choice—one they’re eager, if apprehensive, to take on. Helping them navigate the admissions process has been a central part of the mission of Bridges Project. This HIP collaboration has highlighted the importance of looking to both sides of college enrollment—student preparedness before college, and student support once enrolled—to see how vital both elements are to the ultimate success Taos students will experience in higher education.

Changing Taos’ college-going patterns to reflect higher levels of college completion and appropriate employment for our returning graduates will take the efforts of the whole community. If we open the conversation now, our concerted effort and expertise can make a difference for the Taos our children will inherit.

“Start earlier so students are more prepared,” Carla Chavez suggested. “Even start maybe at the middle school. Gather a community effort to make that start earlier—I know Bridges is only one small group, but I know there are people in the community who would step up to help out.”
Thank You