

**Summary Notes from the January 2010 Phone Call:  
Investing in Postsecondary Education: Improving Student Outcomes in the South**

On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010, over 40 Southeastern Council on Foundations (SECF) members and affiliates participated in a phone call about investing in postsecondary education in the South. Co-hosted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and MDC, the call was a follow-up to an information session held at the 2009 Annual meeting of SECF. MDC president David Dodson and MDC Senior Program Director Bonnie Gordon shared MDC's preliminary thinking about a community partnerships proposal to address the Gates Foundation's goal to double the numbers of low-income young adults who earn a postsecondary credential by the age of 26. Participants were invited to share their questions, advice, and reactions to the ideas presented.

David Dodson gave an overview of the Gates Foundation's long-term postsecondary goals.

- Goal: Double the number of low-income young adults who complete postsecondary credentials with labor market value by the age of 26.
- A brief description of the strategy may be found at:  
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/learning/Documents/postsecondary-education-success-plan-executive-summary.pdf>
- The Gates Foundation is undertaking a component of this work at the community level. How do we cultivate the will, the sense of urgency, the kind of systemic alignment, and the strategies for sustainability that can produce better community level outcomes at a greater scale?
  - The Gates Foundation believes that the enabling conditions for increased postsecondary attainment result when a community is focused and committed to the goals they have professed.
  - Community partnerships can be a critical catalyst for realizing the outcomes that the foundation seeks.

Mr. Dodson then shared MDC's preliminary thinking about a strategy to allow Southern communities to participate at an increased level in progress towards the goals that the Gates Foundation has articulated.

- MDC is proposing a targeted RFP process that would select four to six communities with an identified, credible, respected lead organization that would involve itself in a deep community engagement process to create a strong civic partnership focused on postsecondary success.
  - The lead organization would be charged with helping to build a local partnership of stake-holding entities, from institutions with positional power and authority to grassroots organizations.
  - These partnerships would first examine critical equity issues facing their communities with particular attention to gaps in postsecondary attainment.
  - The partnership would then forge a strategic action plan that would address inequities and success gaps and develop opportunities to create research-based strategies for improving postsecondary success.

- The partnership would also play a generative role in looking at institutional and policy obstacles that stand in the way of institutional and community success.
- The goal of this work would be to have the partnership develop an action plan, help align the relevant systems necessary to bring about implementation, and begin the work of generating community will, commitment, institutional alignment, policy alignment, and resource allocation, all directed toward higher levels of postsecondary success.
- MDC's hope would be to have in the South four highly visible partnerships working diligently and gaining traction to align systems and build a reinforcing culture of high expectations and accountability for increased postsecondary attainment. The underlying rationale is that higher postsecondary achievement levels for underrepresented populations, who will lie at the heart of our future workforce, are absolutely necessary for the economic success of our region. If we can jumpstart these partnerships in the region, we can catalyze a powerful demonstration effect that shows our ability to close the postsecondary equity gap that currently holds our region back.

Mr. Dodson then called for participant questions, concerns, and feedback on the plan. David Dodson, Bonnie Gordon, and Gates Foundation Program Officer Nisha Patel contributed to responses.

**Gayle Williams from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation asked:** What do we know from other initiatives structured in a similar way about the conditions necessary for sustaining these partnerships over time, when the outside funding is gone?

David Dodson: In order to ensure sustainability, we must engage partners from the start that have resources or are connected to networks that are capable of mobilizing those resources. Partners with deep community credibility may not be the same as those with resources, so partnerships must be broad with potentially unconventional membership. Partnerships must also have an understanding of the importance of institutional and public policy as a reinforcing element. This work involves cultivating public will and credibility that is grounded in a real commitment to equity outcomes. Key institutions must be aligned and given incentives to work on these outcomes, and the partnership should have policy and organizing smarts so that policy helps sustain the gains.

Nisha Patel: The foundation views its investments as catalytic. To have a lasting sustainable impact, we look for a re-alignment of public resources in the long term and changes in public policy that would lead to increases in postsecondary attainment for low-income students.

**Mary Thomas from the Spartanburg Community Foundation asked:** What about a community where the partnership is already built and will and energy are already cultivated? Are there different points of entry for communities?

David Dodson: MDC meets communities where they are and helps them move to the next level. This work could be an opportunity to make sure the roots are deepened, to extend the membership of the partnership, to involve actors who are not yet fully engaged and participatory, and to build on existing momentum. The planning and the learning would be

highly contextualized and customized to meet whatever conditions a community might find. Every community is different, so the process would be flexible and self-driven enough to take into account work that has already been done.

**Carolyn Douglas from the Community Foundation of South Alabama asked:** Our foundation is already engaged in postsecondary work, especially in better delivery of adult learning. My question is, does the prospective site have to be a specific locality, or can it be a region?

David Dodson: The site could potentially spread out further than just one community. We would have to consider the best approach. Do we involve a full eight county area at the start? Or do we work at a subset and then expand? We must make sure that the systems are aligned with the opportunities that exist in the labor market, and a labor market usually expands across a region. It all depends on the particular situation that defines your community.

**Aisha Nyandoro from the Foundation for the Mid-South asked:** Has MDC defined the selection criteria for sites?

David Dodson: We are still in the process of deciding exact criteria, but we have a good idea of what we will be looking for. We will be looking at the institutional landscape of the community: are there strong and credible institutions that award postsecondary degrees? Are there community organizations that provide a connective tissue to underrepresented communities? Is there a degree of understanding and engagement by the employer community? Is there some awareness on the part of elected officials? Is there a track record of successful community wide systems reform that has benefitted low-income populations? Are there sources of embedded, place-based philanthropic resources? Those are indicators of capacity. We will also consider indicators of readiness: expressions of understanding and will, a track record of working successfully in a collaborative way.

Bonnie Gordon: We will also be taking a look at the current state of the policy environment. Is there hospitality to the notion of change? Is there an ongoing conversation between K-12 and postsecondary? Is the community college articulating its role of moving students through the pipeline? What are the system impediments and what is promoting success?

**Michael Marsicano from the Foundation for the Mid-South asked:** There is a Social Innovation Fund targeting intermediaries to do similar process work. Could we consider a marriage of these funding sources?

Bonnie Gordon: We always want to be mindful of what other opportunities are available to make this an aligned effort rather than an add-on that stretches already thin resources. We are tracking this work, and once we are further along with this proposal we will have a conversation there.

**Gayle Williams from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation commented:** I would like to reinforce the deeply place-based nature of this work, and the non-existence of a standard template. I'm glad to hear that MDC is continuing to hold these values up in its work.

Bonnie Gordon: This is an important lesson we've learned in Achieving the Dream, where we have to honor the differences of various campus cultures. It is not unlike student learning: they all start at different places, and we can't approach them all as if they think in the same way.

**Carolyn Douglas from the Community Foundation of South Alabama commented:** We have to take each individual and look at their needs and life context; adult learners need community support.

BG: This initiative seeks to combine social and academic support, and we will maintain sensitivity to differences between traditional and adult students.

**Mary Thomas from the Spartanburg Community Foundation commented:** Our experience has demonstrated the importance of having a community champion from the private sector, the academic world, and the non-profit world for defining the crisis with credible data to build sustaining public will.

Bonnie Gordon: The work can only succeed with champions that are connected to resources and have credibility in broad networks.

**Maggie Osborn from the Conn Memorial Fund asked:** My community is focusing on pre-K, since achievement gaps start before children get to the door. Can a community come to you where they are on the conveyor belt?

David Dodson: The foundation has an unambiguous focus on the acquisition of labor-market credentials by age 26, and the expectation is that within the life of the grant, there would be evidence of strong movement towards this goal. It would depend on how proximate to those goals the work is. The parents of these children are lacking credentials, so this could be an opportunity to look at the data and look for intervention points that focus on an inter-generational problem and look for a breakthrough.

Nisha Patel: Our explicit goal is increasing postsecondary credentials for low-income people ages 16-26. This is not to say that these investments can't build on existing work. We would conceivably support work in a community that is focused working across the educational continuum (P-20), but our resources would need to be targeted for low-income 16-26 year olds.

**Ann Manley from The Dr. P. Phillips Foundation asked:** In Orlando, we want to get more students to select a technical education instead of four-year degree. Do you have an inclusive definition of postsecondary credentials?

David Dodson: "Credentials" is deliberately inclusive and refers to anything with labor-market value. We give broad consideration, as long as the credential allows people to get employment at a higher wage and connect to career pathways.

Bonnie Gordon closed with a brief summary of the important comments heard on the call, which included: meeting communities where they are, the need for local champions to create lasting strategies, ensuring broad membership, using a flexible definition of community, aligning educational systems with the labor market, readiness and capacity indicators, sensitivity to the differences between adult learners and traditional students, the deeply place-based nature of the work, honoring local culture to ensure long-lasting systemic change, aligning this effort with other opportunities, using an inclusive definition of “credentials,” and making catalytic investments.

Nisha Patel joined Gordon and Dodson in thanking all of the participants and Helen Ishii from SECF for her efforts and support in making the call possible. Gordon invited all who wished to comment further to be in touch with her and indicated that contact information and summary notes would be made available shortly.