

# Persist: Near-Peer Coaching's Impact in Closing the College Completion Gap

Learn how Catalyze near-peer coaches help students from low-income backgrounds persist through degree completion

This white paper details how near-peer coaching materially improves college persistence and retention among students from low-income backgrounds. You will learn:

- ✓ How the systemic challenges that affect college retention among students from low-income backgrounds have grown due to the coronavirus pandemic
- ✓ How near-peer coaches can effectively augment existing student services to help address the most common barriers to college completion
- ✓ How three universities used Catalyze to boost semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention among Pell-recipient students



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# Part 1: The College Attainment Gap

There is an increasingly urgent gap in higher education between the college degree aspirations of students from low-income backgrounds and their degree attainment.

Significant social and financial pressures have hit higher education leaders, creating new urgency for proven solutions to close this degree divide.

# There's an Increasingly Urgent College Completion Equity Gap in Higher Education

**HERE'S WHAT WE KNOW:** More than 30 percent of all enrolled college students come from low-income backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Despite significant investment in on- and off-campus persistence and retention programming by colleges and universities, too many of these students continue to be left behind as they graduate at rates far lower than their higher-income peers.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the degree divide is stark. Students from higher-income households are more than twice as likely to graduate college as their peers from lower-income households.<sup>2</sup> Forecasts indicate that this trend may become even more dire as a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic.

When students from low-income backgrounds graduate, especially a student who is the first in their family to attend college, they are **3.5 times less likely to live in poverty and 24 percent more likely to be employed** when compared to peers who don't attend college.<sup>3</sup>

Students who leave college before earning their degree fare little better in the job market than those who never attended at all. In August 2019, 72.3 percent of people with a bachelor's degree were employed, compared to 62.5 percent of those with some college and 54 percent with a high school diploma and no college.<sup>4</sup>

And compared to college graduates, a person who lacks a college degree will have diminished lifetime earnings. College graduates earn upward of \$1.2 million more in their lifetime, have higher rates of civic engagement, and live healthier and longer lives than their high school graduate peers.<sup>5</sup>

## 71%

**GRADUATION RATE AMONG HIGHER-INCOME STUDENTS<sup>2</sup>**

## 32%

**GRADUATION RATE AMONG STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS<sup>2</sup>**

A College Degree Has a Proven Impact in Disrupting Cycles of Poverty

**THOSE WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE ARE:**

## 3.5 times

**LESS LIKELY TO LIVE IN POVERTY<sup>3</sup>**

## 24%

**MORE LIKELY TO BE EMPLOYED<sup>4</sup>**

**AND EARN UPWARD OF**

## \$1.2M

**MORE IN THEIR LIFETIME<sup>5</sup>**

A systemic lack of equitable academic readiness, fragmented resources, complex college systems, and resource-constrained staff have created unfair barriers to college completion. These barriers have only been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

There is no one cause for the degree divide. Rather it is a cumulative effect resulting from a series of systemic and complex social and socioeconomic barriers that students from underinvested communities face before and during the college experience. Inequitable academic readiness and/or limited knowledge of college systems can mean a tough adjustment to the rigors and expectations of college, and unforeseen hurdles as students navigate the complex steps of the college process.

A sense of belonging and community is essential for students to build the supportive peer groups and friendships they need to succeed in college, yet for students who are the first in their family to attend, or are from underrepresented identities, finding this sense of belonging can be difficult. Financial literacy is also key to effectively managing the financial burden of college — from navigating financial aid to managing day-to-day finances or holding down a part-time job to cover housing and food expenses. Finally, time management and other soft skills play an important role in college success as students tackle competing priorities and responsibilities.

Without the social capital of exposure, preparedness, and expectations, the potential of aspiring young adults from lower-income backgrounds is often defined more by their zip code than their talent, motivation, and effort. **Low-cost, high-touch interventions provided by Catalyze near-peer coaches are keeping more students from low-income backgrounds on the path to a college diploma.**

## Significant social and financial pressures have hit higher education leaders, creating new urgency for proven solutions to close the degree divide

The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected the wellbeing and college retention of students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

An already complex and inequitable higher education system has been further disrupted by the pandemic, accelerating and widening the college completion gap.

“The toll of this pandemic is, in a word, devastating,” John King Jr., president and CEO of the Education Trust and a former U.S. Secretary of Education during the Obama administration, said during a call with *Inside Higher Education* reporters in May 2021.<sup>6</sup>

“ The toll of this (coronavirus) pandemic is, in a word, devastating. It’s eroding students’ academic success, their emotional well-being, and their personal finances. ”


John King Jr., president and CEO of the Education Trust and a former U.S. Secretary of Education

“It’s eroding students’ academic success, their emotional well-being, and their personal finances.” According to *Inside Higher Education*, that impact has been felt most by students of color. Initial data suggest that lower-income students and those from minority groups may suspend their pursuit of a college degree, perhaps permanently.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Americans without college degrees were among the first displaced from jobs. And if we use history as our guide, they will likely be among the last rehired. Of the 7.1 million net jobs lost during the Great Recession, nearly all were occupied by workers holding less than a bachelor’s degree.<sup>7</sup> The middle class shrank, as the top one percent of Americans captured 85 percent of income growth.<sup>8</sup>

Burgeoning employer commitment to hire a more diverse workforce has increased market demand for more graduates from HBCUs.

In response to the 2020 resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, many Fortune 500 employers have substantially increased their investments to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). According to an August 2021 CNN article, recent hikes in employer interest in HBCUs is at an unprecedented high. “In my 24-year career in higher education, all in career services, I cannot recall a time when recruitment efforts at HBCUs have been this high and have stayed this high,” said Seana Coulter, director of the Center for Career Development at Morgan State University, an HBCU in Baltimore.



The college degree attainment gap is real. Unparalleled challenges and growing market opportunities make it imperative that higher education institutions pursue retention solutions uniquely designed for this valued segment of their student population.

Equitably and effectively supporting students from low-income backgrounds is a strategic and societal imperative. Greater persistence and retention will support higher education institutions' financial sustainability, empower a more diverse college educated workforce, and open up the greater economic mobility that a college degree has been proven to afford.

**Near-peer coaching provides a proven, uniquely personalized, and effective way to keep students from low-income backgrounds on the path to college completion.**







## **Part 2: The Near-Peer Coaching Solution**

Evidence-based, low-cost, high-touch interventions from near-peer coaches that amplify persistence and retention results for low-income and first-generation students

# Near-Peer Coaches: Low-cost, high-touch interventions that boost persistence among low-income and first-generation students

## Catalyze Near-Peer Coaches Are:

Recent college graduates serving as AmeriCorps Members who act as one-on-one mentors to college students. They provide direct service and guidance through each stage of the students' college experience, from helping them navigate their first year, to persistence from first to second year, and retention through graduation.

Near-peer student mentoring and coaching are increasingly recognized as effective tools to promote better student persistence, retention, and completion outcomes, particularly among students who are from low-income backgrounds and/or the first in their family to attend college. In fact, College Possible students who

receive near-peer coaching are **three times more likely to complete a four-year college degree** than their peers from similar backgrounds.

Understanding why near-peer coaching works so effectively requires a careful look at the alignment between the most common barriers and challenges associated with persistence and retention of students from low-income backgrounds, and the near-peer relationship value proposition. Namely: proactive, high-touch, “just-in-time” interventions; proactive outreach aligned to the student’s day-to-day experience; the integration of in-person relationship-building and virtual engagement from relatable near-peer recent graduates; and the amplification of available resources to empower students to persist through degree completion.

“ This (Catalyze) partnership taps the potential of one of our most powerful assets, recent graduates, who are uniquely equipped to mentor students following in their footsteps. ”

Alisa White, Former President, Austin Peay State University

## The Catalyze Near-Peer Coach Difference

With 20 years of proven success, our near-peer coaches have become a critical factor in sustained retention — and graduation — of this valuable sector of an institution’s student body. With a Catalyze partnership, institutions can cost-effectively enhance existing student persistence programming via proven, wrap-around support.

Catalyze partners are provided trained, on-campus AmeriCorps coaches, program administration support, and a proprietary coaching curriculum that adds proven capacity for better student retention. Partner institutions can customize the program to reach top-priority student segments, to meet specific retention goals (such as first-to-second-year retention), and/or to augment known gaps in student support.

### What Sets Near-Peer Coaches Apart

Coaches provide targeted, proactive support to foster college persistence and success by addressing the most common academic, financial, and social barriers to retention via personalized, individual coaching. Trusted relationships are central to the success of the near-peer model, enabling coaches to surpass retention rates achieved by staff alone. Key differentiators include:

#### ✓ **NEAR-PEER RELATABILITY**

Research shows that a relationship with a coach or mentor close in age to the student produces meaningful, positive social and academic outcomes (Leidenfrost, et al., 2014; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Near-peer coaching support can be a critical lever to unlocking greater college success for students from under-resourced backgrounds. A recent survey of Catalyze students offered anecdotal evidence that supports this finding. One respondent described the role of her coach as follows: “I was in a position in which my GPA was falling due to stress and personal doubt. With [my] coach, I was taking steps toward new goals and I had someone that was holding me accountable for my actions, which was what I needed at that time.”

#### ✓ **TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS**

Research shows that low-income families trust relationships over systems (Payne, DeVol, and Smith, 2011). The nearness in age between coaches and the students they serve creates a unique level of trust and accountability where positive relationships can flourish. Catalyze students reflect this trend: historically, more than 91 percent of our students agree their coach is someone they trust, and is someone they can consistently rely on for meaningful information and support to keep them on track.

**✓ HIGH-TOUCH, “JUST-IN-TIME” INTERVENTIONS.**

Coaches help build students’ social capital via high-touch, “just-in-time” interventions that respond to the top known barriers to student persistence, while remaining agile to respond to the current issues students face in real time. The Catalyze curriculum delivers deliberate, proactive interventions directly aligned to the student experience, providing careful attention to common barriers that first-year students face, freshman-to-sophomore-year persistence, and staying on track through degree completion despite known and unforeseen challenges. As a result of the remarkable circumstances that students faced in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, coaches adapted to provide support on key needs like internet access, accessing mental health resources, and helping students adjust to all-virtual or hybrid classroom experiences.




## Catalyze Institutional Partners Receive:

- ✓ Full-time, near-peer coaches with shared identities to their target students
- ✓ At least nine tailored coach-to-student interactions per student, per year
- ✓ Access to a proprietary coach curriculum
- ✓ Student progress monitoring dashboards and semi-annual reports
- ✓ Comprehensive coach training and development plus access to a full skill-building resource library
- ✓ National communities of practice for both coaches and coach supervisors
- ✓ AmeriCorps grant administration
- ✓ Seamless team integration
- ✓ 1:140 coach to student ratio

# Catalyze Near-Peer Coaches Are Keeping More Students on the Path to a College Degree

The table below demonstrates examples of the interconnection between the near-peer coach relationship and relatability, “just-in-time” interventions, and the most common barriers to college degree persistence among students from low-income backgrounds.

<p>Top barriers to retention of students from low-income backgrounds:</p>	<p>With the support of proactive, high-touch interventions from their trusted Catalyze coach, students:</p>
<p><b>COMPLEX COLLEGE SYSTEMS</b> can be difficult to navigate, which can turn common college steps like course registration and seeking help from a professor during office hours into student hurdles.</p>	<div data-bbox="613 751 782 919" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><b>1. Better Understand, Navigate, and Use More On-Campus and Community Resources</b></p> <p>Coaches, often alumni of the institutions at which they serve, get intimately familiar with campus systems, staff, and available resources, helping students navigate this often complex web to successfully access the myriad resources available to students on and off campus. That typically translates into more support to students and better optimization of existing student service investments for institutions.</p>
<p><b>SOFT SKILLS</b> like time management, study skills, and budgeting are necessary to adjust to the demands and stresses of college life.</p>	<div data-bbox="607 1213 776 1373" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><b>2. Build Personal Management Skills</b></p> <p>Coaches offer hands-on guidance to help students build more-effective tools for managing their academic workload, personal development, and finances, skills that play an important role in student persistence. Coaching on note taking, balancing work/family/school time, choosing a major, finding internships, anticipating expenses, and budgeting are all part of a Catalyze coach’s toolkit.</p>
<p><b>FINANCIAL LITERACY</b> is key to effectively managing the financial burden of college, from navigating financial aid, to managing day-to-day finances, and holding down part-time jobs to cover housing and food expenses.</p>	<div data-bbox="607 1612 792 1772" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><b>3. Effectively Navigate College Finances</b></p> <p>A study of 43,000 students at 31 community colleges and 35 four-year universities in 20 states and Washington, D.C. found that 36 percent of college students are food insecure, and 36 percent are in unstable housing situations.<sup>10</sup> Coaches help students build confidence in identifying and securing financial support for college, from completing FAFSA applications, to identifying scholarship opportunities.</p>

<p>Top barriers to retention of students from low-income backgrounds:</p>	<p>With the support of proactive, high-touch interventions from their trusted Catalyze coach, students:</p>
<p><b>INEQUITABLE ACADEMIC READINESS</b> can mean a more difficult adjustment to the rigors and expectations of college academics.</p>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: flex-start;">  <div> <p><b>4. Stay On Track Academically</b></p> <p>Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that only 21 percent of students from low-income backgrounds will complete a college degree in six years.<sup>11</sup> The coronavirus pandemic has further threatened many students' ability to stay on track academically, particularly with family income loss and other factors affecting a student's ability to continue their educational path. Research shows us that once disrupted, vulnerable students are less likely to get back on track toward achieving their degree. Near-peer coaches provide critical persistence support like helping with class scheduling and accessing resources like counseling centers and faculty support – key factors in helping students effectively navigate significant challenges without compromising their college dreams.</p> </div> </div>
<p><b>A SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY</b> is essential for students to build the supportive peer groups and networks they need to succeed in college. For students who are the first in their family to attend college and/or from underrepresented identities, finding this sense of belonging is especially critical.</p>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: flex-start;">  <div> <p><b>5. Form Supportive Peer Groups and the On-Campus Relationships Critical to Their Success</b></p> <p>Students with a strong sense of belonging fare better academically, and research shows that students of color and first-generation students generally have a lower sense of belonging on college campuses.<sup>12</sup> Near-peer coaches help students create on-campus networks via study groups and other supportive, structured environments. The relatability of coaches and their similar lived experiences goes far in bridging the belonging gap.</p> </div> </div>
<p><b>LIMITED COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE</b> means students may not know where to turn to for help – from getting guidance on class scheduling to accessing mental health resources. This can leave many available campus and community resources underutilized.</p>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: flex-start;">  <div> <p><b>6. Navigate the Most Common Challenges Affecting First-to-Second-Year Retention</b></p> <p>More than 70 percent of current Catalyze coaches are focused on supporting first-to-second-year student retention. Coaches offer early, proactive contact in the first year of college to discuss study skills, to utilize faculty office hours and campus tutoring services, and to help students manage their college academic workload.</p> </div> </div>



## **Part 3: Catalyze Near-Peer Coaching in Action**

How three universities boosted retention among first-generation and students from low-income backgrounds

# Near-Peer Coaching Produces Promising Results in Retention of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

In 2018, the University of Cincinnati's College of Arts and Sciences was challenged with meeting the needs of a diverse group of students while facing significant faculty and staff resource constraints and falling retention rates for students from low-income backgrounds.

University staff saw Catalyze as a way to augment existing student resources with proven, customized

persistence support to their most vulnerable students. Each trained Catalyze coach managed a caseload of up to 120 students, serving as a dedicated, on-campus coach committed to each student's success. The coach-to-student ratio allowed each coach to make an impact on a significant number of students. Through proactive, high-touch interventions, coaches helped students navigate common persistence barriers, answered a broad range of questions, and directed students to appropriate campus resources.

Paramount to the program's success at the university's College of Arts and Sciences was the near-peer aspect. Coaches were close in age to the students and came from similar backgrounds, with recent college experiences to draw from — important factors in building trust and relatability.

“ Our partnership with Catalyze was born out of our commitment to even the playing field for our students from low-income backgrounds, our under-represented students, and our first-generation students. And the data tells us that it has worked. ”

Lisa Holstrom, Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences at University of Cincinnati



University of  
Cincinnati College of  
Arts and Sciences

**80%**  
**RETENTION**  
CATALYZE STUDENTS

**73%**  
**RETENTION**  
NON-PARTICIPATING  
PELL-RECIPIENT STUDENTS

**+7%**  
**RETENTION GAIN**

St. Cloud University

**86% RETENTION**  
CATALYZE STUDENTS  
FALL 2019-FALL 2020

**72% RETENTION**  
ALL OTHER STUDENTS  
ON CAMPUS

**+14%**  
**RETENTION GAIN**

Austin Peay State  
University

**71% RETENTION**  
CATALYZE STUDENTS FALL  
2019-FALL 2020

**55% RETENTION**  
ALL OTHER PELL-RECIPIENT  
STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

**+16%**  
**RETENTION GAIN**

## Students with Near-Peer Coaches Consistently Show More Successful Retention Outcomes than Those Without

In the 2018-2019 school year, 382 University of Cincinnati freshmen participated in the Catalyze program, all of whom were Pell-recipients, first-generation, first-year students. From fall 2019 to fall 2020, Catalyze students experienced a retention rate of 80 percent compared to a 73 percent rate for non-participating Pell-recipient students, a seven percent gain. From spring 2020 to fall 2020 the Catalyze retention rate was 89 percent, surpassing even the 86 percent retention rate for all students on campus.

Two more Catalyze partner institutions, St. Cloud University and Austin Peay State University, have witnessed even more impressive retention results.

At St. Cloud State University, the retention rate for Catalyze students from fall 2019 to fall 2020 was 86 percent, a 14 percent retention gain compared to the overall student population. At Austin Peay State University, the retention rate for Catalyze first-year students was 71 percent, far exceeding the 55 percent retention rate of other Pell-recipient first-year students.

Aggregated results across the 3,300 students now served by Catalyze coaches across eight partner institutions is equally promising. For spring 2020 to fall 2020, retention rates for Catalyze first-year students was 81 percent, five percent higher than rates for all Pell-recipient first-year students. Fall 2019 to fall 2020 retention rates for Catalyze first-year students was 77 percent, six percent higher than rates for all Pell-recipient first-year students.

While each partner institution faces its own unique set of challenges, the data above show a clear correlation between the role of near-peer coaches and retention gains for students from low-income backgrounds. The relatability, training, and personalized support provided by each coach helps students successfully navigate and overcome the most common barriers to degree completion.

Equally important, as an extension of existing staff resources, **Catalyze coaches offer cost-effective support while helping optimize existing service investments.**

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## Explore a Catalyze Partnership Now

We're eager to explore how a Catalyze partnership can support better retention of first-generation students and students from low-income communities on your campus via our wrap-around support.

Contact a Catalyze Partnership Manager today to schedule a free consultation with our team: [Catalyze@CollegePossible.org](mailto:Catalyze@CollegePossible.org).

LEARN MORE AT:  
[CollegePossible.org/Catalyze](https://CollegePossible.org/Catalyze)



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