

Partnering for Success:

A Case Study of Persistence Power in Missouri



Student-focused organizations have the ability to increase the impact of their services by using partnerships and collaborations synergistically. As college access and success initiatives grow, organizations face new and often daunting opportunities to combine their expertise. This case study will examine the lessons learned by the Wyman Center and The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis as they teamed up with university partners for a new college persistence program.

PERSISTENCE POWER: THE IDEA AND ITS EVOLUTION

When the number of college access and success organizations in St. Louis, Missouri, began to grow, some leaders began noticing that organizations were not coordinating their services to reach students; rather, they were developing a tendency toward competition for limited financial resources. In order to reverse this trend, organization leaders came together to form *St. Louis Graduates*, a regional collaboration to focus on improving postsecondary completion rates. This initiative set a public precedent for working together, and it helped open doors for further collaboration.

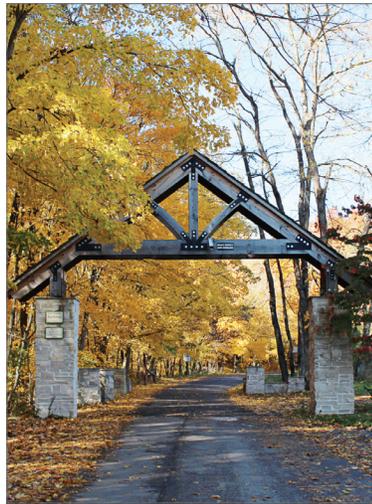
As a result of working together on the *St. Louis Graduates* Steering Committee, Allison Williams, Wyman Center (Wyman) Senior Vice President, and Faith Sandler, Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis (SF) Executive Director, established a strong relationship based on complementary goals. They identified key strengths each of their organizations could contribute to serve students more effectively through joint programming. They launched *Persistence Power* to combine their areas of expertise.

Wyman provides programming to students beginning in the 8th grade. Throughout the six years that they participate in the program, teens develop non-

cognitive, social, and emotional skills vital to excelling in a postsecondary education environment. They receive support through exposure to the postsecondary process, including preparing, applying, and selecting their institutions. SF provides scholarships and financial aid counseling. They also provide interest-free loans — often called “last dollar” funding — to fulfill any gaps between students’ financial aid packages and their

federally-determined expected family contribution to fund postsecondary education. The two organizations combined these strengths and developed a model for persistence support, bringing together ongoing personalized coaching, access to financial resources, and engagement with higher education partners. The program also performs persistence activities such as regular check-ins with students from representatives from both organizations, to maximize student support. While the partnership was initiated by leaders

of these two organizations, staff members now meet regularly. This purposeful time together helps them make sure they are all on the same page and that they have a sense of an extended team. In addition, they also seek out university partners to complete the three-pronged approach to their program, which combines institutional, psychological, and financial supports for students.



Front gates for the Wyman Center

HOW IT WORKS

When Wyman teens graduate high school and enter the *Persistence Power* program, they maintain their relationships with Wyman. Wyman and SF provide summer transition programming to ensure students are fully prepared for college. Programming prepares students to navigate the social and bureaucratic environment of higher education, as well as financial pitfalls and paperwork that can impede success. Finally, it connects students to university services that complement Wyman and SF services. The *Persistence Power* program has actively partnered with Ranken Technical College and Southeast Missouri State University.

Wyman and SF persistence coaches check in with students via phone calls, email, and text messaging once a quarter, and they visit partner college campuses once a semester. These campus visits continue to leverage Wyman's long-standing relationship with the students, since students have attended years of Wyman programming and have developed close relationships with Wyman staff members. Wyman and SF coaches have a strong working relationship with each other, and the *Persistence Power* students feel comfortable sharing the ups and downs of the semester with both. Wyman and SF coaches work together to identify resources that may help students who are struggling. In addition, SF provides financial literacy and scholarship information to make sure students are able to maintain their studies. An additional piece of the program's

shared persistence coaching is the "Freshman 15" component, which matches all Scholarship Foundation first-time freshmen, including those who are not part of the targeted Wyman population, with volunteer mentors. These volunteer mentors "check in" with first-time freshmen on transition milestones and challenges, by telephone or email.

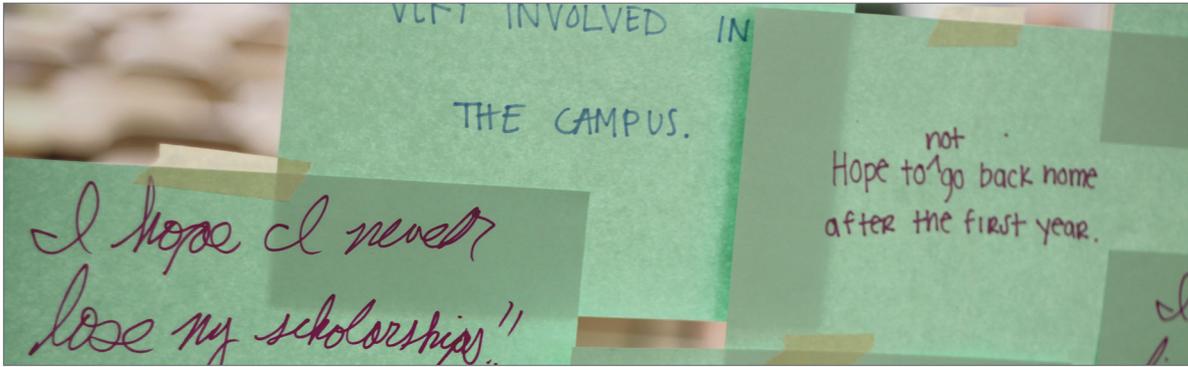
In addition to the support delivered by these organizations, postsecondary institution partners offer students a myriad of support services. Wyman students meet with campus representatives during their high school junior year, when they first tour the campuses. As students choose to apply to partner schools, Wyman team members are in ongoing communication with the school. This early relationship-building deepens when students enroll at the partner school, as they now have contacts who can help them find existing campus resources and feel comfortable and supported on campus.

These combined services are designed to ensure that students have support, as well as information and access to the variety of resources both nonprofits and university partners can offer to help them succeed. These supports continue formally throughout the students' sophomore year of study, but students are able to contact and meet with coaches as needed, even after they transition out of the program.

In their words:

This effort included the intentional development of a "three-legged stool" of supports for students — coaching, financial, and institutional. We developed this model based upon the research around barriers and supports for student persistence to degree completion. SF and Wyman began intentional work from this perspective believing both in a commitment to shared goals — increasing the number of St. Louis-area adults with a postsecondary degree — and a commitment to developing an effective partnership or collaboration to best meet this need.

— Allison Williams, Wyman Center Senior Vice President



As part of the “Summer Bridge” program, students are encouraged to share their hopes for attending a postsecondary institution.

PARTNER SNAPSHOT: THE SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION OF ST. LOUIS

Students served: Low-income students in the St. Louis metropolitan area

Services provided: SF provides its students with detailed information and guidance on funding sources and procedures for higher education. In addition to this comprehensive information, SF provides scholarships and interest-free loans to eligible students to reduce their debt burden.

Key contributions to *Persistence Power*: SF brings a wealth of knowledge on financial coaching.

Services provided for program participants include:

- Support in navigating the financial aid process: summer orientation on financial literacy; assistance

with FAFSA completion; comprehensive coaching on grants, scholarships and loans; and assistance understanding debt — how to avoid, and how to manage

- Detailed written resources on a variety of financial literacy/financial aid topics
- Connection to financial aid professionals at partner universities
- Persistence coaching in financial literacy and financial aid assistance
- Direct financial support in the form of interest-free loans and grants

PARTNER SNAPSHOT: RANKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Degrees offered: Certificates, two-year degrees, and some four-year degrees in the areas of automotive, construction, electrical, manufacturing and information technology

Key contributions to *Persistence Power*: Ranken leaders emphasize retention and graduation of students. They promote an institutional culture of support and accountability, including a comprehensive intervention system triggered whenever a student receives a failing grade on an assignment.

- Numerous scholarship resources
- A commitment to *Persistence Power's* requirement to meet all unmet financial need of participating students
- Participation in the Federal TRIO Program at Ranken
- Participation in Ranken’s Student Success Program
- A proactive institutional culture, established by top leadership
- A long track record of high employment, and placement rates for graduates

PARTNER SNAPSHOT: SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE

Degrees offered: Comprehensive academic programs in agriculture, the arts, business, education, health, human services, science, and technology

Academic support services offered:

- *Educational Access Program (EAP)* drives a comprehensive approach to providing academic intervention, mentoring, and financial aid support for U.S. ethnic minorities.
- *TRIO/Student Support Services (SSS)* provides academic services and support to increase persistence and graduation. These services are supported by federal funds and target approximately 200 eligible students.
- *Learning Assistance Programs (LAP)* provides in-person and online programming for all students to develop academic and personal enrichment skills.

Key Contributions to Persistence Power: Designated contacts at Southeast Missouri State (SEMO) provide

Persistence Power students with support and connection to university resources before they even begin their studies. Support includes:

- Financial aid packages that complete student need — up to the cost of attendance — without loan debt, when paired with support from SF
- Key contact: Trent Ball, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Retention, communicates regularly with Wyman and SF colleagues
- Campus culture of student support through cross-departmental collaboration: For example, Trent serves on the Financial Aid Appeals Committee and attends the annual Financial Aid staff retreat. A member of the Financial Aid staff, in turn, serves on the retention committee that Trent oversees. By crossing the traditional departmental boundaries, these student support professionals are able to better understand and meet the interrelated needs of their students.

PARTNER SNAPSHOT: WYMAN CENTER

Students served: Students from disadvantaged circumstances in grades 8-12 in the St. Louis metropolitan area are served by Wyman's leadership development and postsecondary access programming.

Services provided: Progressive summer programming and year-round support throughout high school provide students with social and emotional support and leadership development to prepare for postsecondary education.

Key contributions to Persistence Power: All Persistence Power students are Wyman teens, so all come with the network and supportive relationships developed during middle school and high school. During the persistence program, Wyman provides:

- Curriculum and activities throughout high school, around postsecondary access
- College tours and visits, beginning with their sophomore year in high school

- Essay and personal statement preparation for college applications
- "Summer Bridge" programming to support student transition from high school graduation to postsecondary launch
- Persistence coaching through sophomore year in college
- Introduction of students to university staff at partner universities, prior to and after first day of classes
- Continued psychological support to encourage self-efficacy
- Coaching in soft skills necessary to flourish in college, such as managing time, coping with stress, interacting proactively with faculty, etc.
- Opportunities to grow as mentors, serving Wyman high school students
- Connection to other Wyman students at their institution

LESSONS LEARNED: STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIP

As detailed in the description of the *Persistence Power* program, Wyman and SF have identified several keys to the success of their partnership. Organizations seeking partnerships should consider these steps:

- Develop trust and mutual respect for each other's work.
- Identify the strengths of each organization, and develop projects using those key strengths.
- Recognize that collaboration does not threaten the niche of each organization. Commit to perform at the highest level in your respective niches, allowing others to provide their excellent services to complement yours.
- Value excellent service for students, above all.
- Collaborate, beginning with leadership, but also incorporate employees at all levels.

In their words:

Intentional partnership between Wyman and Scholarship Foundation is rooted in a foundation of both complementary capacities, as well as willingness to share "credit" for contributions to outcomes. ... Each organization is clear enough about its own mission to declare the contribution of the partner as value-added, and to share in counting the individuals who succeed among outcomes to measure as a collective or shared "win."

— Faith Sandler, Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis Executive Director

LESSONS LEARNED: STUDENT BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

The ultimate goal of the collaboration was to achieve greater collective impact on student outcomes. For *Persistence Power* leadership, the program was designed to provide students with:

- Aggregated financial resources, tailored to students' individual needs
- Noncognitive development, and social and emotional support
- More seamless transition to and through postsecondary education

While students may not be aware of the differential benefits of the programmatic changes, their descriptions of their experiences echoed the program's goals. Maurice Kemper, a student at Ranken Technical College, described the benefits of the program for him:

- Motivation, one-on-one assistance, and continuity from Wyman

- Smooth transition to college
- Informative financial orientation from SF
- Good opportunity for experience at Ranken

At Southeast Missouri State University (Southeast), senior Lisa Nolan and freshman Jarrid Snyder reflected on the benefits they saw in the collaborative approach. "[Students] would be able to come to campus knowing there are already networks established," Jarrid said. "The formal agreement matters," he said. The students explained that many circumstances can arise to derail the path to postsecondary success.

Through the *Persistence Power* program, Wyman teens have official channels connecting them to a support system at Southeast as well as to the financial training of SF. This capitalizes on the relationship the students formed with Wyman,



Jarrid leads teens in an ice breaker exercise where all participants work together to “untangle the knot” without letting go of each other’s hands.

the resources of Southeast and the expertise of SF. Jarrid sees this coordination as important.

“They [Wyman staff] prepare you so you could go it alone, but it’s very beneficial that they’re still here,” Jarrid explained. Both students value, and want to remain

connected to, the program, and to incoming students in need of support. Lisa works to support student success initiatives at Southeast, and Jarrid works with Wyman during the summer. In their minds, that three-legged foundation helps provide whatever resources students may need in order to make it through to graduation.

LESSONS LEARNED: CHARACTERISTICS OF A STRONG INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

To achieve the goals of *Persistence Power*, Wyman and SF sought Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that could provide institutional supports as students transition to and through their postsecondary education. Some IHEs proved to be a “good fit” for the program, while others were not able to commit to the level of partnership needed for the program. To be a successful partner in *Persistence Power* or a similar program, IHEs should have established persistence programming in place on campus, and be able to demonstrate the success of this programming. Programs should

be thoughtfully implemented, with an eye toward consistency and sustainability. IHEs should be committed to meeting one hundred percent of the demonstrated financial need of low-income students. To develop a successful partnership, IHEs must have broad “buy-in” from campus leaders and professionals on the ground who provide direct services to students. While the approval of senior leaders is an important first step, it is not enough of a foundation for success. Senior leaders must grant staff the flexibility, autonomy, and resources to fully engage in the partnership.

Key departments to engage include admissions, financial aid, residential life, and support services, to name a few. IHEs should foster a campus culture of communication and collaboration, which integrates student support and services across departments. Successful partner universities for the *Persistence Power* program had an institutional commitment to serving low-income students, and had a senior-level administrator willing to champion the program and create buy-in from other organizations.

In summary, IHE partners should have:

- Established persistence programming
- Commitment to meeting one hundred percent of student financial need
- Broad buy-in from campus administrators and staff
- A campus culture of communication and collaboration
- A key point of contact with political capital to champion the program initially

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS

IHEs must be prepared to commit a variety of resources to sustain a successful partnership. Most importantly, commitments include financial aid resources to target students. In addition, IHEs must commit resources necessary to sustain the program on campus and to contribute to pre-college programming with nonprofit partners. A successful partnership requires that IHE staff have a presence in the program, and engage with students well before they arrive on campus, in order to foster a sense of continuity and expectation in students. IHEs must also be prepared to provide frequent and substantive student performance data to the nonprofit partners in order to monitor individual student needs

In their words:

From a university perspective, we have learned that effective institutional partners are those with alignment in financial aid policies. Our students (low-income) must attend institutions that commit to meeting one hundred percent of need. This commitment can manifest in a combination of loans and grants from state, federal, and external sources (as is the case with our partners at Southeast Missouri State University and at Ranken Technical College). Institutional policies that hold a university to meeting just a certain percentage of need create challenges in bringing the full benefits of this type of partnership to a student. While we are still able to work with students at these universities from a coaching and support perspective, we have not been able to leverage the full extent of financial support that could be available to students.

— Faith Sandler, Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis Executive Director

and evaluate the overall success of the program. Lastly, IHEs must be prepared to develop staff to work knowledgeably and effectively with the nonprofit partner and its students.

Key IHE inputs for a successful program include:

- Financial resources
- Engagement in pre-college program
- Data
- Staff development
- Accessible student support staff with a clear case management approach

BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP TO THE INSTITUTION

IHEs with established persistence programs often have experience collaborating with college access programs and scholarship programs individually. From each partnership, the IHE might benefit in several ways, but by engaging in a three-pronged partnership, IHEs stand to gain all of the benefits listed above. In addition, from such partnerships, IHEs benefit from the opportunity to share program costs more efficiently. If the three partners are communicating effectively, the IHEs benefit from “triangulation,” ensuring that students are fully supported with complementary, rather than redundant, services.

Benefits for IHEs include:

- Increased ability to attain mission of providing high-quality education to all students
- Enrolling students with a realistic view of college
- Sense of continuity for enrolling students
- Platform for proactive outreach to high-need students
- Additional financial resources for high-need students
- Additional academic and emotional supports for high-need students
- Reinforced marketing of campus resources by nonprofit partners
- Increases in retention percentages



As part of the summer bridge program, Wyman teens participate in mock interviews to practice communication and interpersonal skills needed in the workforce.

CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION FOR THE PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS

Even the most deliberate and well-implemented partnerships will present challenges, but awareness of potential pitfalls can allow the organizations to plan ahead and navigate these challenges effectively.

Challenges and questions that *Persistence Power* leaders have encountered include:

- Creating buy-in for all students
 - Calibrating service delivery to individual students is simultaneously a potential solution and an additional challenge
- Deciding if, and how, to support students with the *Persistence Power* program at universities that are unable to partner, to ensure one hundred percent of student financial need is met
- *Persistence Power* leaders have found that universities who identify low-income students as part of their target market are more likely to be able to accommodate the program
- Replicating the partnership with other universities where Wyman and SF do not have established champions
 - How can organizations identify those champions?
- Sustainability of funding

Tools

This case study provides a detailed description of steps by Wyman and SF to develop a partnership with complementary services to improve student outcomes. While the “lessons learned” section offers points to consider when developing a partnership, this section provides additional tools to assist in formal collaboration.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

To formalize the terms of a partnership, the IHE and nonprofit organizations should jointly develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU should be revisited and revised annually. Items to consider documenting in the MOU include:

- Purpose and goals of the partnership
- Primary responsibilities/functions of each partner
- Physical resources provided by each partner
- Financial resources provided by each partner
- Communications plan between partners
- Communications plan between each partner and students
- Timing and terms of data sharing
- Timing and location of joint events

Additional Resources

- Trellis Company’s publication *Certificate and Degree Completion* and *Communicating for Completion Alignment* provide useful campus assessments and other tools to help institutions assess and develop their strengths in creating integrated support services for students.
- St. Louis Graduates’ partners, a regional collaboration to focus on improving postsecondary completion rates, have developed and compiled a variety of resources for their community that can offer assistance to other communities interested in regional collaboration: www.stlouisgraduates.org/community/publications.



A nurse presents to Wyman teens about her education and career path for “Career Day.” The goal is to help teens recognize the variety of opportunities that are available to them, and develop an appreciation of and understanding for the education and training needed to be successful.

About Trellis Foundation

Founded by Trellis Company (formerly TG), Trellis Foundation is a public charitable organization built on a 40-year heritage of supporting students and families in Texas who are pursuing their educational and career dreams. We focus on improving attainment for low- to moderate-income students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to earn a postsecondary credential or degree.

For more information about Trellis Foundation, visit www.trellisfoundation.org/about-us/.

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